



## “Just because they’re lies doesn’t mean they’re not true”: Learning and transmission of lies among storytellers

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### **Abstract**

*In diverse rural communities located near the borders separating Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, traditional storytellers known as contadores de causos use lying as a strategy for their performances. Their legitimacy as storytellers greatly depends on the way they utilize this strategy. This article discusses the processes of learning, transmission and reception of lies in this region, where “telling true stories” and “telling lies” are often considered synonymous. During several years of ethnographic observation, it was noted that lying is performatized as a sort of provocation, establishing a game between storytellers and their audiences. Lying must thus be understood from the perspective of situated learning, as the result of a collaborative process that emerges from specific situations and contexts. To better understand the ambiguities, doubts, ironies and games expressed through lying, it is necessary to participate in the storytellers’ “community of practice,” allowing us to learn to listen, tell stories and perhaps even to lie...<sup>2</sup>*

### **Keywords**

*Lie, storytellers, oral narratives, oral performance, learning*

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At night and on rainy days, everyone spent their time telling stories.  
Maybe half of them were lies, but they told them just the same...

Ruben Techera – Cerro Pelado, Uruguay (2010)

This article isn't about lying; it is about the irony, playfulness and doubt that come into play in narrative events in which "truths" (yes, with quotation marks) are told by traditional storytellers on the borders between Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay.

When I began my ethnographic observation in the region in 1997, it was difficult to imagine the intimate relationship between "telling *causos*," and "telling lies." There is an element of lying in the very definition of *causo* and in the storytelling context, the worlds of reality and fiction are so closely intertwined that frequently *causo* can refer to both. Thus, although a humungous lie (well told and of course, told as if it were true<sup>3</sup>) can be highly valued, a great truth, a "real incident," or a "historic event," when duly explained, also has its significance within the realm of this narrative community.<sup>4</sup> Lies not only form part of this playful and humorous world but also help to construct the community's desired identity through connotations of truth. As the Argentine anthropologist Adolfo Colombres (1998: p.17) argues, there is an element of truth to all oral traditions that persist over time: "Because truth is not only a property of events: the social imaginary is also expressing a truth."

For the local population, *causo* is a narrative genre that refers to any oral narrative with a beginning, middle and end. However, there is a range of what could be referred to as emic subgenres, such as war *causos*, terror *causos*, *causos* in which money is buried, "hot" (dirty) *causos* and *anedotas* (funny stories), among others. Any of these can be fingered by the audience as a lie either before or during the narration, but the latter, the *anedotas*, are most associated with lying. Further on, we will see why this is so. First, however, I would like to briefly present the theoretical, geographical and especially the sociological context of my study.

The area along the borders between Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay is known for its plains, referred to as "Pampa," and for its local inhabitants, the *gaúchos* (Brazil) or *gauchos* (Uruguay and Argentina). These men, rural workers without a home or a permanent job, were a frequent topic of the travelers, historians and writers who visited these lands at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to these accounts, the *gauchos* often sat talking in circles, a sign of the origins of the strong oral tradition among the locals. The dominant orality in the region went beyond daily conversation, producing narratives that cross national borders (then in the process of being drawn) and formulating, according to my hypothesis, a common, intra-border identity

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<sup>3</sup> In this regard, it is important for the audience to recognize the codes that are being used in the performance in order for them to identify the 'tenor' of the narrative.

<sup>4</sup> In keeping with Lima (1985), I consider that a narrative community is comprised of storytellers and listeners who participate in the same network. This network is based on the mutual knowledge of narratives and the practice of sharing, creating and performatizing them.

(Hartmann, 2011). Because of the circulation of oral narratives, the population on both sides of these borders developed common forms of oral communication and body language. Thus their narrative performances serve not only to communicate but also to create local identities and affinities that are about gestures and words, about what is said and what is inferred, while establishing a communicative game with specific rules. This is the point where lies come into play.

Over the course of long periods of fieldwork in the region (in 1997, 1998, 2001, 2002 and 2010), I encountered many stories/*causos* that were introduced or concluded as follows:

“Truthfully spoken and told!”

“He tells the story and he says it’s true.”

“It may sound like a lie, but it’s the truth.”

Or simply: “Éééééééé verdade...” (“liiiiiit’s the truth...”), borrowing a phrase from Gaúcho Pampa, a renowned storyteller in the region who was then 101 years old.

Lies, then, were alluded to by denying them, through these little formulas utilized as narrative strategies to establish for the listener the semantic field in which the story should be understood. In spite of these caveats, however, I never stopped to wonder whether what I was hearing was true or false. What interested me at that moment was the narrative and performative richness of the storytellers and the storytelling events. Now, years later, I understand that in order to enter, participate and understand the multiple meanings of “truth” and “lies” in those borders, I had to undergo a learning process as a listener. A learning process in which I learned to laugh at the right time, to cast doubt when necessary, to flout certainties and fundamentally, to enjoy the “possible worlds” that materialized in the *causos*. This article deals with the processes of learning, transmission and reception of lies in this border region. As Barnes argues in his book “A Pack of Lies: Towards a Sociology of Lying” (1994), learning to lie convincingly is an important part of human socialization. For that very reason, it is possible to meet adults in a range of social and cultural contexts practicing their hand at lying at certain times and for certain people. In this regard, although lies appeared only subtly in my reflections at that time, I now clearly see them as a way of producing knowledge.

On the one hand, I have approached my work from the perspective of performance studies, following the arguments of Victor Turner (1981, 1982, 1992), Richard Schechner (1988, 1992, 2012), Deborah Kapchan (1995) and Edward Schieffelin (1996, 1998). However, I also focus on the performative approach to language developed by Richard Bauman (1977, 1986), Charles Briggs (1985, 1996) and Esther Jean Langdon (1996, 1999), among others. Until now, I have focused on lies through the prism of the storytellers’ performance and on the construction of the narrative event as a whole, in relation to the audience, the setting, the social context, etc. Here, however, I would like

to examine lying as ability, as “knowledge incorporated” (Hastrup, 1994<sup>5</sup>), as a symbolic and multivocal construction that requires an “education of attention” (Tim Ingold, 2001).<sup>6</sup>

In this article, then, I present a discussion on the multiple meanings, contexts for transmission and the learning processes of lying among traditional storytellers along the border region in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay.

### **A *causo* - or a lie?**

In this border region, it is common knowledge that a *causo* involves an episode lived by the storyteller or one that s/he heard: “There’s a funny story I tell, one that happened to me... Of course, every time I tell it, I exaggerate a little more. (...) But after all, of course... that’s how storytelling goes, right?” (Seu Antônio<sup>7</sup>, age 36 – Uruguaiana, Brazil) However, according to Seu Antônio, an important part of the *causo* is exaggerating—or to use Bauman’s term, “stretching the truth” (1986: p.21)—but it is frequently a personal narrative as well (“Tellers augment but we don’t invent,”) with all the rhetorical and stylistic devices a personal narrative implies, like the use of the first person, references to real people and things, specific indicators of time and space, etc.

In an article entitled “Oral Tradition: Do Storytellers Lie?” Isidore Okpewho seeks to understand the strategies utilized by Ijo storytellers in the south of Nigeria when telling local epic tales. Among these strategies, the author identifies self-insertion of the teller in his tale (regardless of whether he directly experienced the narrated event), a common practice that is widely accepted by the audience. The first-person performance not only brings the storyteller and the listener closer but also allows an ordinary experience to take on broader metaphorical meaning, in accordance with the familiar standards of representation in the local culture. In this regard, I agree with Okpewho (2003: p.225, 226) when he proposes that instead of keeping to the purist aspirations characteristic of Western scientific thought (especially in relation to the historical value—associated with the “truth”—of the narratives), we should recognize the aesthetic and pragmatic imperatives that guide the narrative acts in oral cultures.

What is important here is to perceive what could be referred to as the ontological ambiguity of the *causo*, as it always lies **between** fact and lie but should not exclusively be considered one or the other. In this context, therefore, the notions of truth and lies

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<sup>5</sup> For Hastrup, cultural models are incorporated, and just as they are internalized in daily bodily practices they are also expressed (externalized) in actions and words. In this article, I am particularly interested in the author’s approach to the “knowledges incorporated” in the field by anthropologists.

<sup>6</sup> Based on his reading of James Gibson, Ingold proposes that learning is not achieved through mental representations or the organization of ‘raw’ sensory data but through a sensitization of the entire perceptual system. In this way, as opposed to an accumulation of disembodied and decontextualized information, what each generation passes on to the next is the sensitive knowledge created through an “education of attention.”

<sup>7</sup> “Seu” is a Portuguese popular title equivalent to “Sir” that is often incorporated to the person’s name to such an extent that it becomes odd to refer to that person by their name alone. The female equivalent is “Dona,” which also appears before certain names in this article.

are mixed and become difficult to distinguish. It is similar to the way Turner describes conceptions of reality and fiction, as notions that vary depending on the context (1981).

It is interesting to note that in some cases, storytellers emphasize the difference: “That’s not a *causo*. It’s a fact...” In general, *causos* are told when several people have gotten together and preferably when other storytellers are in the audience. “It’s nice when there are several of us. One tells one story and then another recalls another story, and a third storyteller tells a different one, which reminds another storyteller of yet another one...” At the beginning of a *causo*, as I indicated above, the names of people and locations are strategically mentioned. “Seu Bibi Carvalho is right here... that’s his nickname, Bibi Carvalho, did you know? Over in [the town of] Picada Grande.”

There are certain rules that also establish the time and the place where *causos* should be told, although these rules don’t always apply: “People don’t tell a *causo* during the day. It has to be at night, close to the fire. (...) They say that whoever tells a *causo* by day grows a tail...” (Seu Valter Seixas, age 65 - Caçapava do Sul) To tell *causos*, “you need the gift,” “you have to have a knack for it,” and certain experience in life is also essential. “The kids there where I’m from are all quiet types. I mean, I never saw any of them tell a *causo*. How could they? No novice kid can tell a story,” (Dona Zilda, age 47 - Caçapava do Sul). There are, however, exceptions in this regard, as evidenced by this comment that I heard during my fieldwork: “Sure he’s a novice, but boy can he tell a *causo*!”

*Causos* and lies, then, frequently occupy the same space and it can be difficult to distinguish between the two. Through the context in which both are told, it becomes easier to define the two. I have identified five categories of lying associated with *causos* along the border:

***The lie is categorized as an anedota and told to make people laugh.***

This funny story was told on a winter night by a well-known *contador de causos* to a group of around twenty men and women in the border town of Rivera, Uruguay:

There’s the case of a *gaudério*<sup>8</sup> here from Bagé who went off to the country fair in Esteio to take care of a bull and whatnot... The boss gave him the afternoon off to go visit Porto Alegre [the state capital]. He got all dressed up: belt, gaucho pants, hat bent at the forehead, a fine scarf tied around his neck... He went out walking out in the city, looking at the shop windows, when two *bichinhas* [homosexuals] walked by him and said, “Oh, what a handsome gaucho! What’s your name?” And he said [the storyteller changes to a deep voice]: “My name is Terêncio!” [a man’s name] [the teller pauses for a moment and then speaks in a high-pitched voice]. “But you can call me Odete.” [woman’s name] [Alejandro – Rivera, Uruguay – 2002]

<sup>8</sup> According to Nunes & Nunes (2000: p. 227), the term “*gaudério*” refers to “A person with no fixed job who lives at the expense of others, going from house to house. Terms used pejoratively to refer to the old *gaúcho*. (...) Person who travels frequently. *Gaúcho*.”

Due to their comic nature, *anedotas* demand elaborate performances by storytellers, who often bring each character to life by changing their posture and/or adding a specific gesture and using different voices. There may be dramatic changes in volume and in the way local jargon is used,<sup>9</sup> as seen in Alejandro's telling of this *anedota*, a story the locals had heard many times before.

*Anedota* –and here I return to what I stated at the beginning of this article—is the subgenre most commonly associated with lying. I believe that the example above allows us to understand why. Everyone wanted not only to hear the story but also see it being told again: the curiosity and enjoyment of the audience reside not in WHAT is told but in HOW it is told (in the teller's performance). The *anedota* thus configures a mutual agreement between teller and audience. When this agreement is struck just the right way, it rewards those involved with the communion of laughter.

***Lying is utilized as a narrative strategy, as a provocation.***

Here I would like to offer an example of how lying is part of a game that challenges the creativity of the tellers: a storyteller tells the story of a snake that freezes solid on a cold winter night. It is important to emphasize that in order to retell the stories below, I had to go over my notes and my own recollections, as I have no audio recordings of them. Let's see the *causos*:

One night, some *carreiros* (barrow boys, men who used to sell produce and other products out of a wheelbarrow) stopped on the road to rest. They started to prepare their dinner: a sausage they would grill over a fire they had built on the ground. Since it was really dark, when they went to grab the sausage, they grabbed the frozen snake instead and put it over the coals. When it unfroze, it started thrashing around, knocked over the makeshift grill, gave the men quite a scare and went slithering off into the night.

After this first *causo* was told, the audience laughed a lot and made joking comments, insinuating that the story was a lie. After a moment or two, another storyteller, feeling challenged, instantly tried to outperform the first teller, seeking to indirectly contradict him by telling an even better lie. He said that once he was out *campereando* [checking on cattle in the field] and he lost his mechanical watch. He was really miffed, because he knew that it would be practically impossible to find it in the immense countryside. After several days, when he had lost all hope of finding it again, he was riding out in the field when he saw the sunlight reflecting off of something on the ground. He had found his watch! But the strange thing was that it was ticking away when it hadn't been wound in days. That's when he noticed **that same snake** that was going to be grilled as sausage by the other teller making its way through the countryside. Every day, that snake would slither right over the watch stem, winding it as he passed... [Storytelling circle – Uruguiana, Brazil - 1997]

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<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed reflection on the performance of *gaúcho/gaúcho contadores de causos*, see Hartmann (2005).

Obviously everyone laughed, not only at the story, but at the expertise of the second storyteller, who took advantage of the narrative device of the other teller, that is, the snake, to tell an even better lie. Thus lying is taken as a contest: who tells the best lie?

### ***Lying is justified as a survival technique***

There are many situations in which lying is justified, like in the example below, lived by Gaúcho Pampa and told by his friend Barreto from Santana do Livramento, Brazil. Lying is often necessary to ensure the narrator's survival in situations such as war and smuggling. Gaúcho Pampa, who was mentioned earlier in this text, was 101 years old and he lived with Barreto, the owner of a general store who had taken in this old *peão* (a term used to refer to rural workers hired to look after cattle and horses). Gaúcho Pampa had worked his whole life on plantations near the border; he never married and at the end of his life, he had no other place to go. Gaúcho Pampa was a sort of myth in the region; everyone knew him and admired him because of the life he had lived and because of his stories, like the one Barreto told me:

You know, he told me one... Back in the War of '23... A battle that took place I don't even know where. He was sent here to the Brigada [the local military barracks] to bring a message. They sewed the piece of paper into the collar of his shirt so that no one would find it. And off he went. He went over the trenches and crossed over onto the side of the Brancos –he fought for the Maragatos [Brancos and Maragatos were enemies during the Revolution of '23]. So the Brancos got hold of him and they said, "Hey, you're with the enemy. Where are the others?" "No, no, I'm not in the army..." Then, to throw them off, he told them that he was coming to get medicine for the daughter of his boss because the girl was sick on a plantation right near there. It was all a lie! "With that greasy harness you've got on your horse, you can only be up to one thing: taking a message to the barracks!" "No, it's all greased so that I can ride faster. You want to kill me? Kill me then!" So they took hold of him and they made him dig a hole as deep as he was tall, to bury him alive. He was tied up for two days. They would point at him with a dagger and say, "Now you're going to die!" But he didn't die. So they let him go: "Well then, go get that medicine before the girl dies. But we know you're a soldier!" And he went straight to Brigada. He got there and told them what had happened. They pulled off his shirt, ripped open the collar and there was the message he had brought. He tells the story and he says it's true. He's a legend. [Gaúcho Barreto – Santana do Livramento, Brazil – 2001]

What is interesting about Barreto's story is the fact that lies appear, we could say, in "layers." Gaúcho Pampa lies to his enemies (he is going to get medicine for a sick girl) and they lie to him ("Now you're going to die!"). Both are used strategically in a context of war, and for that reason, both are justified. In the meantime, we can perceive a third reference to lying, albeit indirect, when Barreto, the teller, says, "He tells the story and he says it's true." The reference to lying through denial (truth) sets a great number of

local stories, as mentioned earlier, in an ambiguous tone. This expands their possible interpretations, which will depend on contextual negotiations and especially, on the performative abilities of the teller.

### ***Lying as a way to reinvent oneself***

During my stay at a large estate in the region of Santana do Livramento, Brazil, in 1998, the estate owner—a well-known *contador de causos*—told me the story of his life on several occasions. It was a story that he livened up with dramatic tones, a story of conquests won with “blood, sweat and tears.” Starting with what he claimed was a childhood in poverty, he had become a rich landowner and livestock producer as an adult. Now as an elderly man, his performance impressed me because of the energy he put into it and also because of the emotions that appeared as he shared his memories. Even after telling me the same story several times, he would always get so emotional that he would end up in tears. During various trips to the region, I adopted the practice of always mentioning the other storytellers I had met. Whenever I mentioned this particular man during my travels, the only responses I got were limited to, “Yeah, I know him. He’s loaded,” or “He’s the most *gaúcho* in those parts. He always was.” Some time later, I was seated in a storytelling circle at dusk, drinking *chimarrão*,<sup>10</sup> and I brought up this man’s name again. One of the participants in the circle (who, I should mention, was a little drunk), stood up to make his point even more emphatic and said, “That guy is a cattle thief! He’s stolen plenty out there in the countryside!” The other men in the circle laughed a lot but, exercising certain restraint, did not mention the affair again. Later on, I asked the man who had taken me to the circle if he knew anything about it. Surprisingly, not only did he know about the notoriety of my host, he told me that everyone in the region knew about him. Not only had my host been in jail, he had even been on television because he was such a notorious smuggler and thief.

In spite of the fact that my host was so infamous, I noted a sort of code of honor which indicated that he continued deserving the respect—or at least the discretion—of the population. In fact, I concluded that none of them would have just come out and told me about it (and the informer wouldn’t have either, had he been sober). Clearly we are capable of imagining the unbalanced power relations that guide behavior which reveals not only “discretion” but also the concealment (perhaps under duress) of certain truths. However, here I am interested in reflecting on that which appeared to me to be a “lie” at that moment: the emotional narrative of the elderly storyteller could not be analyzed if truth and lies are considered polar opposites. From what I saw, the man’s story may have had many true elements. On the other hand, it could also be considered the truth which that teller had built for himself, a way to legitimize his own life story before his family and community. This ambivalence brought to mind Peter Metcalf, the author of the provocative book “They Lie, We Lie” (2002), who argues that the notion of truth is often dialogic among traditional storytellers. According to Metcalf, this is because truth exists

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<sup>10</sup> A type of tea served in a gourd (made from a squash) and drunk through a metal straw known as a *bomba*.



only as a succession of mutually constructed speaking events. The truth of these stories is thus always negotiated and always contextual. In relation to the example given here, that relationship is clear, because whenever I would try to bring up the topic, comments on the man's wealth continued to appear before stories about how precisely he had obtained such wealth.

I like to think that, perhaps instead of pinpointing the distinction between truth and lies, we may note the similarity between that which Lotman (1976) called the "truth of the language," as the storyteller constructed his narrative with a connotation of truth. According to Lotman (1976:46), the "truth of the language" and "truth of the message" are essentially different concepts. The message can be questioned and doubts can be cast on affirmations, while the language—in this case, narrative language—cannot be judged.

### ***Lying as situated learning***

Oh, that story... I don't know if it's true... it must be, because there's no way my brother-in-law would lie when he was with my sister, so that proves it. He says that out there... they live up on the hill. He said that there was a werewolf up there. It was like a huge dog that would attack the chickens at night. He saw it in the henhouse. One day they got ahold of it and tied it up... and left it chained there on the porch. He says that the next day when they got up bright and early, the werewolf was gone. In his place, my brother-in-law's uncle was chained up on the porch.

[Gringa – Uruguiana, Brazil – 1998]

In some way, horror stories operate on the edge of truth. They are not composed as lies but tellers are clearly aware of their permeable borders when they insist, "They're true stories," or, in the case of Gringa, "There's no way my brother-in-law would lie [...]"

To conduct this little exercise of classifying lies along the border, and considering reality from the ethnographic perspective, I start with the assumption that lying can only be understood in context and when it is shared in a social setting. Most importantly, lies are always presented ambiguously. Lying does not allow for the comfort of truth. It provokes doubt, creating a constant dialogic movement between teller and listener. Finally, as we have seen, it gives the listener a particularly important role, as he or she is ultimately responsible for passing judgment or gauging the legitimacy of what is being told.

As we have seen, lying is always related to narrative strategies. It can be used to provoke laughter and pleasure, through the *anedotas*, or to pull tellers into a contest. Lying can also be justified as a strategy for survival in specific situations of conflict, war or armed combat (that later become narrated events); it can be part of a biographical (re)construction; or it can even be configured as specific forms of learning in certain "communities of practice", like the horror stories among the *gaúchos/gauchos*. These

strategies, however, are not the only ones out there, just as they cannot be found in all contexts.

### Learning to lie

Joãozinho – She’s going to have to go out to Pedro Mentira’s [Pedro Lies].

Seu Rubem - Pedro Mentira’s?

Joãozinho – Haven’t you heard of Pedro Mentira?

Seu Rubem – Sure I have...

Joãozinho – There’s Pedro Mentira, and then there’s the historic district, right...

Seu Rubem – Here everyone lies!

Joãozinho – They might lie but that’s part of their culture, right. We have to go out to Pedro’s... Where there are as many *causos* as there are family stories...

[Caçapava do Sul, Brazil – 1997]

Tellers like Pedro Mentira “might lie but that’s part of their culture, right.” And if lying is part of the culture, then it is possible to learn to lie.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I noticed that lying occupies an important place in the narrative universe of the region, both when naming certain tellers—like the “Pedro Mentira” mentioned above—and when describing their narratives. Audiences, in fact, are expecting and even yearning for big lies, especially when renowned storytellers come together; these situations often have the air of a game or a contest (whoever lies better is the best teller, that is, whoever gives the most convincing performance). This leads me to Schechner (1988), who considers that play permeates all performative behavior. As a multiple and subversive set of strategies that includes trickery, parodies, satires and ironies, playing gives lying an ontological status. According to Schechner, in such a state of fecund deception humans invent ‘unreal’ (as yet untreated) worlds. Performance (and lying, we may surmise) would be the way that these worlds take a specific form in time and in space, as expressed through gestures, words and narratives.

As I have emphasized here, in this border region lying is performatized in the form of a provocation, a game between tellers and listeners, where the lie is often what sparks interest in the narrative performances. By presenting a *causo* as a lie—or as its exact opposite—the teller is creating expectations, making room for interpretations that can be both individual and collective. To understand this process, we need to participate in the “community of practice,” (Lave, 1996) of lying, which will allow us to listen and, who knows, perhaps even to lie...

The learning theory, based on the theory of social practice and developed by Jean Lave, along with her key concept of “situated learning”, proved very useful in understanding the transmission and learning of lies along the border. This approach is based on the notion that knowledge is not constructed in an abstract or

decontextualized manner; it is not merely a mental process but more of a collaborative process that emerges from specific situations and contexts. From the perspective of situated learning, it is possible to observe the impact of social context on learning, through interaction and observation (or imitation). In a dialogue with Lave, Ingold (2001, p. 143) notes:

This process of copying, as I have already shown, is one not of information transmission but of guided rediscovery. As such, it involves a mixture of imitation and improvisation: indeed these might better be understood as two sides of the same coin. Copying is imitative, insofar as it takes place under guidance; it is improvisatory, insofar as the knowledge it generates is knowledge that novices discover for themselves. (...) Both are aspects of the situated and attentive engagement that is fundamental to becoming a skilled practitioner.

If we consider that the *causo* is characterized by its ambiguity, as a story that can be either a truth or a lie, it becomes clear how important horror stories can become in this context: it is true, but it could be a lie/it's a lie, but it could be true.

If, however, we placed horror stories and *anedotas* (two performance extremes, one serious, one comical) on a scale, we could conclude that horror stories have a greater propensity for truth while *anedotas* lean more towards lying. However, would this be the most interesting aspect to focus on?

The *anedota* prepares the listener to hear something that is hard to believe, establishing a game or a pact of sociability and exchange between the teller and the listener that should invariably culminate in laughter and mutual pleasure. A horror story, in contrast, prepares the listener for a possible reality, one established by the stylistic organization of the narrative and by the performance of the teller. Listening here not only prepares me for experiencing a situation of terror: it also conditions me for telling one in the socially established and accepted register (Hymes, 1972).

Along this border region, horror *causos* include stories of women in white, werewolves, witches, headless mules and other “supernatural” apparitions. They always make reference to the teller's own experiences or to something that happened to someone close to the teller, usually a friend or relative. Although the narrative structure of many of these *causos* is repeated in different contexts, during their performances, they are always referred to as real experiences.

For many tellers, ghost *causos* no longer provoke the same level of terror because the apparitions themselves no longer appear the way they used to: “Those *causos* there, those things there, they did exist, but now that's disappearing, people aren't doing so well... There are a lot of magazines that explain it, right, so... They're analyzing it.” (Seu Ordálio, age 88 – Uruguiana, Brazil). For others, the disappearance of fear can be blamed on the lighting along country roads and on estates: “There didn't used to be any lights—just the fire.” In fact, the apparitions that continue appearing are always associated with nighttime and with dark places: “They say that there were plenty of things out on the estates late at night!” My experience in this context where everyone

had experiences with some type of ghost prepared me, in a certain way, to experience them and/or performatize them, while preserving their intrinsic ambiguity.

With these considerations in mind, I would now like to share two of my own experiences with apparitions. One occurred at the beginning of my fieldwork and the second happened years later during another ethnographic work-related trip.

On a large plantation on the Brazilian border with Argentina, I stayed at a house that was also hosting several veterinarian and agronomist interns who had come there to get some work experience. There were several single rooms, a shared bathroom and a living room with a fireplace. I was staying in one of the small rustic bedrooms, which had only a top-hung glass window covered by a simple curtain. The window opened up onto the field. I would spend part of the day with the fieldworkers, watching them work with the cattle, and the rest with the cook, talking about daily life on the plantation. As time passed, I got to know many local stories and one of the characters that frequently appeared in them, the werewolf. One night, I was in my room after dinner, taking notes down in my fieldwork journal, when I suddenly heard someone knocking on my window. Since it was a cold winter night, everyone had retired early and silence hung over the entire plantation. I was terrified. What should I do? Who could it be? What could they want? Since I didn't know the answer to any of these questions, I decided to turn out the light and hide under the covers.

The next day, less scared and more intrigued, I decided to tell the story to one of the interns I had befriended who was also staying at the house. As soon as I finished my story, he concluded, "It was the werewolf who came to visit you!" The "werewolf," however, according to my friend, was a fieldworker excited by the fact that a city girl was staying at the house. In the days that followed, he paid close attention to all the fieldworkers and from time to time he would provocatively whisper in my ear, "Do you think it's him?" The story had no further twists other than seeing a possible "werewolf" in each and every fieldworker.

This was a common example of a "scare" transformed in *causo*. I chalked up what happened to mystery and enjoyed telling the story while emphasizing my (real) fear of the werewolf/fieldworker. A similar example is the story I heard by Lenço Branco, a 78-year-old storyteller who lived in Santana do Livramento, a Brazilian city on the border with Uruguay.

There was this reporter for Revista O Cruzeiro, Dona Teresa Almeida, and she went to interview Seu Ferreira. And Seu Ferreira, well he was... Calling him rude would be a compliment. So she asked for him and introduced herself and then got straight to the point: "Sir, I would like to ask you a few questions..." And he answered, "Listen honey, you're ready to hear the truth, right? 'Cause I'm too old to lie." "Oh, of course. I'm a journalist." And so they got down to it, a question here, a question there. "And tell me something, sir, what of those tales of ghosts on these old estates?" "Well, honey, you asked me to tell you the truth: there's no such thing as ghosts, honey! But sometimes the boss or the boss's son or some fieldworker jumps inside a girl's window!"

My other experience was in a small *pueblo* on the Uruguayan side of the border where I was staying at a rural school. During the week, two teachers from Rivera, a city about 80 kilometers away, spent the night at the school. I had already met a great number of the local families and I was often invited over to their houses or to hear stories. One night when I was walking back to the school after one of these visits, I met a girl with a white dress who asked me what time it was. I answered and then went on my way and she went on hers. There was nothing surprising about this chance encounter, since kids from the community were often out at night, going back and forth between the houses of friends and relatives. A few days later I went to meet a storyteller and when she invited me into the house, I saw a framed picture of the little girl I had met. I asked the woman if that was her granddaughter, adding that I had run into her a few nights ago. Her eyes widened and she lifted her hand to her chest. In a trembling voice, she told me that her granddaughter had died several years earlier but that people frequently saw her walking at night around the *pueblo*. I had quite the scare myself and it brought to mind a story that I had heard years earlier:

There's an estate that I've been to that's haunted: Estância São Pedro. I think it's still haunted today, though I haven't been up there for years. But something really surprising happened there: they say that a married couple came up from Rivera to spend the night. It was a huge country home filled with old family portraits. The couple settled into one of the rooms and that night, a man knocked on the door and when the wife opened the door, he asked for a cigarette. Well, they say that the next day, the woman saw a portrait on the wall and she told the estate owner: "Listen, that man in the picture—he asked me for a cigarette last night." "Oh, that guy there, that's So-and-So. He's been dead for years..." And they found the cigarette pack she had handed him all crumpled up on the nightstand.

[Antônio – Quaraí, Brazil – 1998]

As I have attempted to show throughout this article, the notion of lies has its own cultural values and meanings. When working with oral narratives, this notion, duly contextualized, aids and enriches our understanding of the learning processes of oral traditions and of the narrative strategies developed by its tellers.

The fact of having heard many horror stories, as I already mentioned, provided me with the basis for experiencing this universe. Participating in this "community of practice" enabled me to hear and tell *causos*, truths and lies, understanding their permeable borders, the blurry line between them, as I did in the stories told above. I believe that this learning, which occurs at different levels and in different ways, is only accomplished in the concrete experience of being there, listening and/or telling. Bearing that in mind, I can now come clean on one thing before ending this text: one of the stories I told actually happened. The other is a lie.

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