



*presence*

# An Anthropology of Making in Santa Clara del Cobre

Presence of Absence

Michele Avis Feder-Nadoff  
*Foreword by Tim Ingold*

palgrave  
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Detail, Maestro Jesús Pérez Ornelas heads. Photograph, Leah Salkoff Pohl.

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Brooklyn, NY, USA

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Cover illustration: Maestro Jesús Pérez Ornelas wielding the sledgehammer. Drawing by Michele Feder-Nadoff

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*Dedicated to:  
Maestro Jesús Pérez Ornelas, 1926–2014  
and doña Sagrario Pamatz Saucedo  
and their entire family  
with Mucho Cariño,  
Affection and Appreciation*

*In Memory of:  
Theodore Halkin  
1924–2020  
and my father, Joseph Feder  
1932–2024*





Detail, "Homage to Santa Clara del Cobre: Drawing for a Lotería," 2015.  
Michele A. Feder-Nadoff, Engraving, limited edition.

## FOREWORD

The remarkable book you have in your hands is three things: an homage to the master coppersmith, the late Maestro Pérez Ornelas of Santa Clara, Mexico; a moving account of the author's personal voyage of apprenticeship under the Maestro's tutelage; and a profound reflection, at once anthropological and philosophical, on the techniques, ethics, and aesthetics of making. Its themes are so wide-ranging that I could not possibly summarize them here, nor is it my purpose in this short foreword to do. I would like instead to offer a reflection of my own, on the paradox of placing words *before* a text that is written *after* its subject, since I believe this paradox lies in the heart of the matters, above all of memory and tradition, with which this book is preoccupied. For if anyone stands before the text you are about to read, it is Maestro Pérez himself. After him comes the author, Michele Feder-Nadoff, eager to follow his directions. After her steps—or more precisely, the strokes of her hammer on the anvil—come her words, retracing the same, sometimes painful but always revelatory journey, of learning to work with copper. After her words comes me with mine; and after all these come you, the reader. You and I are right at the back of the queue. What, then, are these words of mine doing at the front of the book?

The answer, of course, is that in the order of the book, before and after are back to front. In life, those who have gone before, who have shown the way and left traces for others to follow, are always ahead of us. They set an example and beckon us forward, into the future. They are in front, we follow behind. It will ever be thus; there is no overtaking the ancestors, no moment—as in the handover of a relay—when they lag behind and we



come out in front, for the next lap. But in the book, the words of the author meet the eyes of readers face to face. In turning to face us, her readers, a writer must need turn her back to the life of which she tells. With this turn, what in life is at the front is now at the back, while what in life are at the back—like us, her readers, or me with this foreword—are at the front. Life flows on as generation follows generation, without beginning of end, for every end is itself a new beginning. But with the book, a passage already undertaken is broken off from the flow, packaged between covers, and returned to us as a thing to be consumed. Reading a book is rather like eating a meal, we start with a full plate and eat until it is all gone, or rather ingested into our own person. It goes from beginning to end.

Many psychologists think that learning a skill is, likewise, a process of ingestion. The skill is all there at the start, contained not between the covers of a book but in the minds and bodies of the masters. But it is too much for the novice to acquire in one go. It has rather to be absorbed, one morsel at a time, gradually sinking in until every last piece is eventually transferred, at which point the learning is complete and the erstwhile novice can make his or her way as an accredited expert. True, the knowledge of the master is unlikely to be set out in words of explanation, whether in writing or in speech. It is often said of craftspeople that however talkative they may be in ordinary life they are struck dumb when asked to elaborate on the principles of their craft. This knowledge, it is supposed, is sunk deep into the body, beneath the level of discourse. It is tacit, ineffable, voiceless. It is not through the medium of words, then, that the skill is transmitted from master to novice, but through a process that psychologists call “imitation.” But there’s the rub. Because in practice, imitation is far from the simple transference mechanism that theorists of embodiment take it to be. It is rather a collaboration in which master and novice work *together* to generate results of common interest. In this process, skills are not so much deposited as continually grown and regrown, along with the bodies that enact them. Learning, then, is a process not of consumption but of co-production. And it never ends.

In short, to theorize enskilment as the deposition of an already existing corpus is to get things back to front in precisely the same way that the book reverses the before and after of a tradition. This reversal, in effect, turns tradition into heritage, a way of life into an object of inheritance. Nothing, indeed, ruptures the continuity of tradition more than its conversion into a heritable legacy. For what this does is to tear a completed

past from a conjectured future, confining the past to a time that is over, finished, and projecting the future as a new order destined to supplant the old. Inheritance might bridge the gap between the two, but does nothing to close it. That's why, when we speak of "handing on" knowledge and skills from generation to generation, it is critically important to distinguish the hand-to-hand gesture of *collaboration*, in which master and novice face the same way, working together in each other's company beneath the same roof, or under the same skies, from the gesture of *transfer*, in which the two parties stand face to face, like the book and its reader, one proffering the gift of tradition, the other ready to receive it.

A living tradition is not passed on readymade but produced and reproduced in the remembering of those who have gone before, as we follow in their footsteps. Maestro Pérez has passed away, yet for those he has inducted into his craft, the author included, his presence remains a force to be reckoned with, just as it was in his lifetime. He stands before them, showing the way. Yet a life's work is never finished, never wrapped up and complete. Death comes to all of us in the midst of things. It is left, then, to the coming generation to carry on with the work, until they, in their turn, pass the reins to the next. There is no end to the journey. Tradition is always under production, always work in progress. It follows that there can be no going forward that is not also a remembering, and no remembering that is not also an unfinishing. How, after all, could you possibly remember a finished past, in which there are no steps to follow? There is renewal in remembering, in following a tradition, but it comes not from supplanting old ways, not from innovation, but from an improvisational opening to newness. And as you will discover in the following pages, it is in the *natality* of tradition, in perpetually giving birth to new things, that its true creativity lies.

University of Aberdeen  
Aberdeen, Scotland, UK  
Aberdeen, 3rd March 2023

Tim Ingold

## BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE: A PROLOGUE

*Dream October 1997, Chicago, night before leaving for Santa Clara: It is dark. The only light emanates from a fire around which a circle of men are hammering an object I cannot see. There are flames and the men are wielding large hammers. It is like a dance, a processional movement. The scene is silent.*

This book is part of an ongoing journey embarked upon in 1997 when I first went to Santa Clara del Cobre to study its traditional coppersmithing, “*cobre martillado*,” in the town’s technical school Cecati 166 with Maestro Máximo Velázquez Correa.<sup>1</sup> During this first apprenticeship visit, I lived with the artisan family of maestro José Sagrario Pérez Pamatz (Pepe), his wife Oliva, and their two young daughters, Alma Xóchitl and Claritza. It was my good fortune that this family was extremely amicable, embracing me into their lives with generosity and humor. It was a double blessing that Pepe, an accomplished artisan, was the fourth son of the grand master Jesús<sup>2</sup> Pérez Ornelas, el Charrón. Little did I know that years later, many would joke that I was the “*hija adoptada of don Jesús*.”<sup>3</sup>

Twenty-five years have passed. As I still mourn the loss of this grand maestro who became my mentor, I compose this text, as an attempt to clearly articulate, transmit, and share the profound lessons and knowledge that don Jesús and his wife doña Sagrario and their family have taught me about artisan life and life in general, about the history and merits of Santa Clara del Cobre, and the peoples who inhabit and inhabited this place for centuries. This grand maestro declared that a perfect “*olla*” does not exist; the *fallas*, errors of one piece compel the artisan to create the next one. So

it will be with this writing. My apprenticeship to become an artisan, to understand what that means and what it is, does not end here. As don Jesús would say, “*Voy a morir y nunca voy a dejar aprender que es a ser artesano.*”<sup>4</sup>

I came to the pueblo drawn by the great copper *cazos*<sup>5</sup> I had seen in Mexico City sold on the street by a peddler from Santa Clara. These enormous forged vessels, like magnets, propel me still to put into words a knowledge that is wordless, yet has a language, is cognitive and transmittable, although resolutely silent,<sup>6</sup> communicated in gestures and movements, through rhythms and tones, through sounds and colors,<sup>7</sup> and feeling. This knowledge is built of observation, concentration, participation, and even perturbation,<sup>8</sup> attentiveness performed, being with people, living with people, and learning and understanding through the efficacious actions and skilled responses of the body-mind, the *cuerpomente*.

Maestro Jesús has joined his comrades, but he has bequeathed Santa Clara a legacy. During his lifetime people said that Maestro Jesús was a *leyenda viva*, living legend. He still is, living on in the memory and hearts of many in Santa Clara del Cobre, and afar.

Brooklyn, New York, USA  
August 9, 2022

Michele Avis Feder-Nadoff

## NOTES

1. As pointed out by one anonymous peer reviewer, this chapter as the following is woven from two strands. Denser notes weave in and out of the more lyrical—yet still theoretically engaged—main body. The intention is to afford the reader an experience that can vary depending on how they want to engage with the footnote material which traces the paths of thought I traveled to arrive at the more simplified poetic text. This style is also taken to invite all kinds of readers into this monograph, not only experienced anthropologists familiar with these academic texts cited, but also artistic or other general readers or beginning scholars. The notes expand the text and also lead the reader off and down side roads which through this meandering fill the path out. The reader is given the choice to stay on the track of the main body of text, perhaps only occasionally referring to the notes for clarification. There is a range of readings between these two ends of a spectrum. Further chapters continue this stylistic structure yet are further knitted and filled out by ethnographic narrative and description.

2. Jesús Pérez Ornelas's baptized name is Felipe, a name given to his third son, however he was known by all as Jesús, or in Santa Clara by the nickname El Charon. In this book, I will use the name Maestro Jesús, which is what I call my teacher.
3. We often tease and joke that I am the *nuera sin marido*, the daughter-in-law without a husband, and the most *consentida*, spoiled. The first *Día de los Muertos*, the year that Maestro Jesús died, we decided it was not a good idea to say I was the *hija adoptada*, adopted daughter, because people might interpret this badly, thinking that I was a child he had fathered in the USA out of wedlock.
4. I am going to die and never finish learning all there is about being an artisan.
5. Cauldrons.
6. Jackson (1998: 14) writes that toward the end of his life Merleau-Ponty "spoke of a silence that was 'not the contrary of language' but rather envelops the speech anew" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 179).
7. This expression also homages reference to Dorothy Hosler's (1994) *The Sounds and Colors of Power: The Sacred Metallurgical Technology of Ancient West Mexico*, one of first books I turned to upon returning from Santa Clara in 1997. Hosler articulates an important correspondence between culturally specific aesthetics related to ritual use and the development of technologies. As opposed to the progressive model, that technical development is only keyed to advancement and linear progression, Hosler proposes the link being related to the material and technological choices made based upon cultural values, rituals. Thus we might think about a material aesthetic, that is technological as well, and part of "craft specialization" in a particular zone or area.
8. The idea of perturbation as well as somatic modes of attention are two important themes which will be expanded further through the body of this monograph. Suffice it for now, attention, speaks to somatic modes of attention via Csordas (1990: 137, 138, 139, 145, 146, 148); also elaborated by Ingold (2012 [2000]: 77, 88, 148, 162, 197, 285, 295, 296, 321, 345, 348, 355), Jackson's (1998, 2013) intersubjectivity, and levels of consciousness via Merleau-Ponty (2012 [1945]). In dialogic exchange, related to the social nature of ethnography, it would refer to the I-Thou presencing of Buber, but is not by any means limited to this reference. Hamera and Conquergood (2004: 433) explain that the "radical theorist Mikhail Bakhtin refers to dialogism as the quintessential mode of knowing. Dialogism, to Bakhtin, means that everything must be understood as part of a greater whole. There is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have potential of conditioning other meanings" (Bakhtin 1981: 426–427 cited by Hamera and Conquergood). This text also presents my

concept of “perturbance,” as developed through my fieldwork in Santa Clara and through my intercultural-educational work as Artistic and Executive Director of Cuentos Foundation in Chicago (1998–2009). This concept and its critical function as expressed in *falla*, failure, and friction will be covered in more depth throughout the proceeding text. Here it is worth preliminarily citing Michael Jackson (1998: 12–13) who writes: “Disturbance on the field of interpersonal relations will register as cultural contradictions, as well as show up as knots and binds in the field of bodily intersubjectivity. Such interconnections between cultural, bodily, and interpersonal domains find expression in the root metaphor of a culture, and disclose to the ethnographer the points at which the habits, idioms, and stratagems of intersubjective become introjected as intra-psychic defenses and projected as transpersonal defenses that govern what can and cannot be said or done within the group as a whole.”

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Special thanks also go to Maestro Pérez's daughters, Martha Laura, Sagrario, Eutimia, Beatriz, Mónica, and daughters-in-laws, Oliva Lucas Infante, Marisol Fraga Parra, and María de la Luz García Pureco, who is also an artisan. The Pérez family and other artisan friends, including Martha Mondragón Acosta,<sup>3</sup> Hilda Mondragón Acosta,<sup>4</sup> Lorena Paredes Rosales, Anita Ziranda Punzo, and the late Agustina Urincho Ángel, helped create an encircling supportive meshwork of friends and collaborators throughout the community.

A big special thanks goes out to my daughter, Malkah Mazal Feder Nadoff, who has shared me with Santa Clara since she was seven years old, suffering my absences or coming along on research trips and volunteering in the non-profit operating out of our storefront apartment and art studio her entire childhood. Our home became our nomadic hearts when she set sail on her adult life, while I also set sail for life in Mexico, to conduct



deeper research as a Fulbright scholar, then a doctoral student, and finally an “official” anthropologist. Malkah is my heroine and my best creation as an artist. Her work as a therapist with youth struggling with mental health is so needed today in our crisis-filled world.

This book evolved from my original Spanish language doctoral dissertation, and for this reason, I thank the doctoral committee director, Dra. Elizabeth Araiza Hernández, El Colegio de Michoacán, and the committee members—Dr. Eva María Garrido, Intercultural University of Michoacán; Dr. Anne W. Johnson, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City; Dr. Olivia Kindl, El Colegio de San Luis; and Dr. Andrew Roth-Seneff, El Colegio de Michoacán. Special thanks go to Dr. Nicola María Keilbach Baer, the director of El Colegio de Michoacán’s programa Doctorado Tutorial en Ciencias Sociales when I began my doctorate. Nicola gently guided me throughout the doctoral process from initial application until my final realization. Her support for my research and her informative navigation made my doctorate possible.

During my final exam Olivia stated that the dissertation could become a very special biographical study of Maestro Pérez and Anne asked me to clarify why I specifically chose to study with this particular maestro. The answer, which will become clearer in this book, is because he was respected and loved by his community, his values were cherished, and his alumni modeled themselves after him. He represents himself in this book but also the community.

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Nothing comes from nothing. I thank here, above, and below only a minuscule list of people that are appreciated, who have supported the fruition of this book and will push me to go forward to the next stage in my life and career.

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## NOTES

1. See Mendoza-Briones (2004: 286–296) for Maestro Jesús' biography based upon interviews.
2. See Mendoza-Briones (2004: 296–298) for Felipe's biography based upon interviews.
3. See Mendoza-Briones (2004: 328–332) for Martha's biography and that of her husband artisan, Carlos Pureco Ángel (Mendoza-Briones 2004: 336) based upon interviews.
4. See Mendoza-Briones (2004: 324–328) for biography of Hilda Mondragón Acosta.
5. See Feder-Nadoff (2017a) for the publication resulting from this conference and research trip.

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