
Corner-Store Dreams and the 2008 Financial Crisis

A True Story about Risk, Entrepreneurship,
Immigration, and Latino-Anglo Friendship

Peter Wogan



Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology

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This book series aims to publish explorations of new ethnographic objects and emerging genres of writing at the intersection of literary and anthropological studies. Books in this series will be grounded in ethnographic perspectives and the broader cross-cultural lens that anthropology brings to the study of reading and writing. The series will explore the ethnography of fiction, ethnographic fiction, narrative ethnography, creative non-fiction, memoir, auto ethnography, and the connections between travel literature and ethnographic writing.

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A True Story about Risk, Entrepreneurship,
Immigration, and Latino-Anglo Friendship

palgrave
macmillan

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Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology
ISBN 978-3-319-52263-0 ISBN 978-3-319-52264-7 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-52264-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017935712

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Cover illustration: © Peter Wogan

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

For Our Parents, Who Taught Us to Dream

Peter Wogan and Ranulfo Juárez

EDITORS' PREFACE

Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology publishes explorations of new ethnographic objects and emerging genres of writing at the intersection of literary and anthropological studies. Books in this series are grounded in ethnographic perspectives and the broader cross-cultural lens that anthropology brings to the study of reading and writing. By introducing work that applies an anthropological approach to literature, whether drawing on ethnography or other materials in relation to anthropological and literary theory, this series moves the conversation forward not only in literary anthropology, but in general anthropology, literary studies, cultural studies, sociology, ethnographic writing and creative writing. The “literary turn” in anthropology and critical research on world literatures share a comparable sensibility regarding global perspectives.

Fiction and autobiography have connections to ethnography that underscore the idea of the author as ethnographer and the ethnographer as author. Literary works are frequently included in anthropological research and writing, as well as in studies that do not focus specifically on literature. Anthropologists take an interest in fiction and memoir set in their field locations, and produced by “native” writers, in order to further their insights into the cultures and contexts they research. Experimental genres in anthropology have benefitted from the style and structure of fiction and autoethnography, as well as by other expressive forms ranging from film and performance art to technology, especially the internet and social media. There are renowned fiction writers who trained as anthropologists, but moved on to a literary career. Their anthropologically inspired work is a common sounding board in literary anthropology. In the endeavour

to foster writing skills in different genres, there are now courses on ethnographic writing, anthropological writing genres, experimental writing, and even creative writing taught by anthropologists. And increasingly, literary and reading communities are attracting anthropological attention, including an engagement with issues of how to reach a wider audience.

Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology publishes scholarship on the ethnography of fiction and other writing genres, the connections between travel literature and ethnographic writing, and internet writing. It also publishes creative work such as ethnographic fiction, narrative ethnography, creative non-fiction, memoir, and autoethnography. Books in the series include monographs and edited collections, as well as shorter works that appear as Palgrave Pivots. This series aims to reach a broad audience among scholars, students and a general readership.

Deborah Reed-Danahay and Helena Wulff
Co-Editors, *Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology*

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A TRUE STORY

All this really happened.

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Cutting the Cloth

If the senior citizens at the Dairy Queen in Salem, Oregon, had walked across the street, they would have found a small corner store with a hand-painted sign in Spanish that read *El Palmar*. The door below that sign offered a portal into another world.

I didn't want to presume that anyone at the corner store would speak Spanish with me, a middle-aged Anglo, so when I walked through the door one morning in September, 2005, I spoke in a combination of English and Spanish, explaining that I was returning a film I'd rented the day before. It was a comedy about a poor guy who sells tacos on the streets in Mexico and gets snubbed by a high-class woman—apparently a classic, but, like a ten-year-old who just watched his first Shakespeare play, I didn't get most of the jokes or why everyone kept breaking out in song.

The man behind the cash register, wearing a baseball cap, long-sleeved shirt, and jeans, immediately responded in Spanish. "Ah, so did you like the movie? It was great, wasn't it?" Unlike other Latinos I'd met in town, he spoke with informal Spanish, the *tú* form used among equals.

We discussed the movie for so long that I had to step aside to make room for other customers, women buying soap for the laundromat next door and candy for their little kids. While the man rang up his customers, I walked up and down the aisles and marveled at my surroundings. The store was about the size of a large living room, and every inch was crammed with merchandise: tortillas, guava and mango juice, candles

with pictures of saints, leather boots, Budweiser and Tecate beer, sewing kits, rain jackets, Mexican cowboy movies, even a stone mortar and pestle tucked in the corner. I had entered a Mexican sanctuary in suburban America.

Back at the counter, the cashier introduced himself as Ranulfo, and, after I told him my name was Peter, he said, "OK, I'll call you Pete."

"You're one of the only *Americanos* who has ever rented a movie in here," he noted with a smile. I liked his directness. Other Latinos in town had just tiptoed around my obvious outsider status.

Continuing in Spanish, I asked, "So are you the owner?"

"Yes, along with the man you met yesterday, my younger brother, Pablo.¹ Before this, we used to work in the fields, growing plants. Getting this store was a giant step, the step of a dinosaur, you know what I mean?"

I chuckled in agreement, and Ranulfo continued, "This is a beautiful country. This is a place where you can climb to the top of the mountain and nobody tells you, 'Hey, get down off that mountain.'"

I agreed again, resisting the urge to point out how many Americans end up groveling in the dirt at the bottom of the mountain. It had been so long since I'd heard someone express such pure love for the United States that I wasn't sure what to say, but luckily Ranulfo followed up with a little joke.

Pointing to his belly, pressing against his untucked shirt, he said, "But this is the worst thing that's happened to me since I came to this country."

Ranulfo laughed at himself, so I joined in, though hesitantly, afraid to seem critical. He wasn't exactly overweight, but he was one of the most spherical people I'd ever met. An artist would have sketched his underlying geometric form with a series of circles. Chubby cheeks, round face, that little belly—all circles.

Turning the conversation back to me, he asked, "No work today?"

"Believe it or not," I said, "this is my work."

Pointing in the direction of downtown, about two miles away, I said, "I'm a professor at the university, and I'm studying Mexican-American culture."

I couldn't think of a simple way to explain that I used to do research with a small indigenous group in Ecuador, but once my young sons discovered baseball, I couldn't bear to keep leaving them every summer for the Andes.² Baseball tapped us into something transcendental, and I didn't want to miss any of it. I was starting all over with a culture I hardly knew anything about.

My truncated explanation still made perfect sense to Ranulfo, who quickly assumed the role of cultural interpreter. He taught me the main Mexican film genres and invited me to come back the next day, to check out his movie database.

He also left me with a tantalizing proverb: *Hay mucha tela de donde cortar*. “There are many places to cut the cloth.”

I took that proverb to mean Ranulfo had more stories to tell, but I didn’t realize the best one was about to unfold over the next few years. He was about to embark on a quest to add a small bakery to the back of his store, using his recently paid-off house as collateral, risking his toehold in America after gaining citizenship and scratching his way out of poverty. He wanted to bake bread and pastries. He wanted to create something with his hands and heart, and he wanted his wife to join him, so she wouldn’t have to keep working at the cannery, pushing vegetables down the production line all day. But Ranulfo didn’t simply want the bakery to provide for his family, just as Captain Ahab didn’t want to kill Moby Dick for mere lamp oil. Like Captain Ahab, Ranulfo wanted to “strike through the mask,” to find out what lay on the other side of observable reality, to know whether the universe loved him.³ He was going to study his dreams every morning for clues to the future, the inner workings of the universe, and his place in it.

I would eventually need Ranulfo at a deep, subterranean level, but during our first meeting I didn’t know any of this. I had no inkling Ranulfo might end up an innocent victim of a housing bubble about to burst and drown the whole country. I didn’t even know if we could overcome our differences.⁴

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

To prevent this endnotes section from ballooning out of control, I only include essential sources directly related to the main text. Also, sometimes I break with narrative chronology, citing sources that I had not read at the time of the events described in the main text.

NOTES

1. Pablo is legally the owner of the store.
2. Wogan (2004a).
3. Melville (1851), Chapter 36, “The Quarter-Deck.” To encourage more reading of *Moby-Dick*, all my citations of it come from the annotated first American edition, available in its entirety at <http://www.powermobydick.com/>, a website with excellent margin annotations by Margaret Guroff. To make it easier for readers who want to use other editions, I cite by chapter number and title, rather than page number. As noted in [Chap. 4](#), “Saints of the Casino,” and [Appendix A](#), “Ranulfo’s Reactions to this Book,” Ranulfo agreed with my comparison between him and Captain Ahab. In fact, he read, commented on, and approved multiple drafts of every chapter in this book. Throughout the text, I try to make it clear where his voice leaves off and mine begins, and [Appendix A](#) adds further clarification about the writing process and his reactions to this book.
4. If by this point you’re craving the type of introductory chapter found in most non-narrative, social-science books, please know that the theoretical justifications for this book emerge in the endnotes for later chapters. My hope, though, is that eventually the analysis, theoretical framework, ethnography, and narrative will become so thoroughly intertwined in the text that it will be hard to separate them.

Invitation

September, 2005

The next morning back at the store, Ranulfo told me to come behind the counter, so I could look at his movie database in the computer sitting a few feet away from the main register. With those simple steps, my perspective changed completely. Suddenly I wasn't just a passing customer or gringo interloper. I was standing in the Inner Sanctum. Everything felt better behind the counter, standing side by side with the owner and taking in the entire store, from the tamarind snacks in front of the register to the juice and beer coolers at the far end of the packed aisles.

Ranulfo's spirits were also riding high. When I asked how business was, he stretched out his arms and said, "Ah, it's so good I feel like the Incredible Hulk. Yesterday I said to my wife, 'Look at me, I'm busting the buttons right off my shirt.'"

"Really?" I asked, playing along. "And what did your wife say?"

"Oh," he said with a sheepish smile, "she just said, '*Sí, sí*. You're a monster. A little monster.'"

We both laughed at the rapid rise and fall of his fantasy, but as the day wore on and I observed Ranulfo more closely, I realized that the comparison made sense. Ranulfo had both the mild-mannered reserve of Dr. Banner and the burning intensity of his alter ego, the Incredible Hulk. Outwardly, Ranulfo was perfectly calm. He rested his hands lightly on the

counter, reserving gesticulations and funny faces for punchlines, keeping his mouth half closed when he laughed, never raising his voice. I caught glimpses of the Incredible Hulk, though, when Ranulfo talked about his dreams for his business, and when he hit me with a big request out of nowhere: Would I be willing to teach an English class?

Before I could answer, Ranulfo launched into his vision for the class. The students would come from the neighborhood: mostly first-generation immigrants from small Mexican ranches who worked in the fields outside Salem's city limits, picking blueberries, strawberries, grapes, and hops, but also the people who worked in the canneries, sorting and packing fruits and vegetables, and maybe some of the Latinos who worked in restaurants, nurseries, and landscaping.¹ In other words, they would be his friends, relatives, and customers. And I would be the teacher, but not the kind you usually find in Mexico, the ones that scold the students whenever they get something wrong, like the teacher in elementary school who made him walk around the school wearing toy donkey ears one time when he hadn't done his homework. Recalling how the other kids called him "dumb donkey" that day, Ranulfo laughed and said those jokes just make you stronger. Still, he didn't want to recreate that atmosphere here in the U.S. No, the students would call me by my first name and we'd be *compañeros*.

I was used to this kind of congenial atmosphere at my college, where we never used donkey ears for teaching aids, but I wasn't excited about taking on the ESL class, knowing how much time it would burn up. Ranulfo didn't give up easily, though. "These students have to understand that it's hard work," Ranulfo said. "It's not magic. It's like there's this giant wall of ice in front of us, and we're blasting through it with a jackhammer." As he said this, he grabbed an imaginary jackhammer, pushed out his already puffy cheeks, and made the "brrrrrr" sound of a motor.

When he quoted a Discovery Channel show about space travel and slipped into full, grammatically correct sentences in English, I discovered Ranulfo himself could speak English quite well, though with an accent, like most second-language learners, including me. I complimented him and started to speak in English, but he quickly switched back into Spanish.

Not content with a jackhammer, he kept looking for another image that might convey his hopes for the class. "They have to be like a boxer and give English a knockout punch," he said. A minute later he switched to swamp imagery. "They can't just fall in a swamp and expect to be rescued. You're there to throw them a rope, but they have to pull, too."

Adding that we would give prizes to the students with the best attendance records (students we didn't have yet, for a class I hadn't yet agreed to teach), Ranulfo proclaimed, "I'm going to be *El Animador*, The Class Motivator."

I wanted to beg off, but I couldn't resist Ranulfo's energy, so I took a leap of faith and agreed to teach the class, provided the students would spend the last 20 minutes talking to me in Spanish about Mexican films and culture. Also, the class would have to end in December because in January I was moving with my family to Mexico, to oversee a study-abroad program in Oaxaca.

Ranulfo agreed, joking that pretty soon all the Americans were going to live in Mexico and the Mexicans were going to live in America.

NOTE

1. *Hispano* was the Spanish term Ranulfo most often used to refer to U.S. immigrants from Latin America. However, when referring to someone like himself, a first-generation immigrant from Mexico, he almost always used the term *mexicano*, Mexican.

Teaming Up

October–December, 2005

Over the next few weeks, Ranulfo and I posted a flyer for our ESL class in the store and we secured a classroom at an elementary school a few blocks down the street, surrounded by small ranch houses, tidy squares of grass, and trimmed bushes. We quickly had about 15 students, mostly men who worked in agriculture and landscaping, and women who worked minimum-wage jobs in restaurants or stayed home to take care of their families. Some had been in the United States for just a couple months, while others had been here for years without any regular chance to interact with English speakers. They were all trying their hearts out.

The only student I felt a bit concerned about was Manuel, who sat with his arms folded across his chest on the first night and tersely stated that his favorite actor was Jean-Claude Van Damme, the action hero. Unsure if I'd heard him right, I held up my finger like a gun and asked if that's what he meant, and he nodded in agreement.

Yet on the paper I handed out asking the students to tell me more about themselves, this was the single sentence that Manuel neatly printed in English:

"I want be with my beutiful son."

I liked this tough guy.

And Manuel made sure his wish came true. Starting the next week, he brought his bright-eyed, 11-year-old son to class with him every night,

and they always sat together in the front row, with his son quietly drawing and doing homework while half listening to our class. Sometimes, when Manuel couldn't follow my English instructions, his son would whisper the Spanish translation in his ear.

There were other kids, too. One time, Ranulfo's son Mauricio, a fourth-grader with soulful brown eyes, instinctively raised his hand when I asked the class, "Where is the flag?" He had momentarily forgotten where he was, an understandable mistake, given that his own classroom was down the hall and similarly adorned with an American flag, maps, and giant posters of puppies and wild animals. When he looked up and saw all the adults smiling at him, he said, "Oops, sorry."

As adorable as the kids were, their presence reminded the adults they'd never speak with the effortless bilingualism and perfect accents of their children. Even Ranulfo's three-year-old daughter—who begged to be included in the class, until Ranulfo told her she was too noisy—was already soaking up English at home, mostly by watching Disney cartoons. Once, after the adults got stumped by an English word in class and a child quickly explained it, I heard a mother sigh.

Ranulfo's English was also far beyond the level of the class, yet he showed up faithfully every night, throwing in jokes to lighten the mood, reminding the adults not to call me *usted*, sir, and making coffee for *el convivio*, a wonderful Spanish word that denotes "the snack break," but literally means "the co-living."

And I was always glad to have Ranulfo there. After the students had gone home, he and I would stand around in the faculty lounge dissecting the class, analyzing who was excelling and who was struggling, and planning what we should do next. Often, unable to pull away, we'd continue our conversations in the parking lot, or I'd drive him the two blocks to his house and we'd talk for another hour or two in my car, parked in the driveway a few feet from his front door. And we didn't just talk about teaching, we talked about everything—Mexican and American culture, NASA missions to Saturn and Mars, immigration, where to get a good deal on tires for our cars. Stories, opinions, and reflections came pouring out of Ranulfo in a torrent, as if he'd been waiting for someone to finally ask what he thought about this strange, beautiful world.

He especially liked telling me about the poverty he grew up with in Mexico. He got his first full-time job at age 12 in Mexico, working at a sawmill to help provide food for his family, walking to work in the cold mornings in open-toe sandals, going to bed every night fantasizing about

owning a bicycle. When he arrived in Oregon at age 19 and started working at a plant nursery, the first thing he bought was a bicycle. He was so happy that he rode that bike for ten straight hours, only stopping for food and bathroom breaks. The funny part, Ranulfo said, was that he had to call in sick for work the next morning because he was too sore to walk, the first time in his life he ever missed work. That was his reward for getting a bicycle.

Ranulfo's childhood poverty remained deep inside him, creating not only a sense of humor about the way the universe sometimes gave him a smack in the head right after something went his way, but also a constant sense of wonder and disbelief at his good fortune in the U.S. To that day, he picked pennies off the ground, paid his bills on time, and never bought anything special for himself. He had never owned a credit card—I used mine to make online purchases for him and he paid me back in cash—and the whole concept of borrowing was alien to his family. When I asked how his father bought their house in Mexico, Ranulfo said, "He didn't buy it, he built it little by little, with us living inside the whole time. He got wood from the forest outside the village, and whenever he could afford it he'd buy some cement, and add a little more." Ranulfo was the first member of his family to purchase a dwelling, a small, one-story house within walking distance of both the store and our ESL class. It wasn't much, but Ranulfo loved it, deeply grateful to have running water, linoleum floors, and a patch of grass in the backyard, a piece of America he could call his own.

Now that he had recently paid off his mortgage, Ranulfo dared to want a little more—a small bakery, to be added to the back of the store. Ranulfo confided in me that he and his younger brother Pablo had just recently started discussing this bold new plan. They wanted to bake bread and pastries, the kind that taste like Mexico. They wanted to work with their hands, as they had done most of their lives, first working on their parents' farm in Mexico, then at plant nurseries in Oregon.

The bakery had even more personal meaning to Ranulfo. It would give him a chance to work side by side with his wife, Lupe. She was working at that time in the fruit and vegetable canneries a couple months a year, pushing heavy pumpkins and other produce down the conveyer belt, so white people could eat pies on Thanksgiving. She needed something better, something more permanent and less physically demanding. Once their daughter went to preschool in another couple years, Lupe would be ready to work full time, but she wouldn't have many job options, given her lack of English and education beyond elementary school. Picking crops in

the fields outside Salem would be back-breaking work, worse than the canneries, so that wasn't a viable option, nor was there any need for her behind the register at El Palmar. The ideal plan was for her to bake bread in the store. The bakery wasn't just a business plan, it was sustenance.

Lupe was truly the girl from next door: her family lived two houses over from Ranulfo's parents in their hometown, a tiny village in the Mexican countryside. She quit school when she was eight to work in the fields, and at age 17 she married Ranulfo and came to live with him in Salem. Lupe, now in her 40s, had long black hair, and she usually wore slacks and loose-fitting, colorful shirts. When she came in the store, she spoke so quietly—always in Spanish—that I had to strain to understand her. Sometimes, in response to my questions, a mischievous smile started to appear at the edges of her mouth and I thought she was about to let a wisecrack fly, but she never did, even when we all got together at their house or their son's soccer practices. Ranulfo assured me, though, that she had a great sense of humor, especially when it came to putting him in his place. She was good for him, and they wanted to work together in the store. The bakery was the answer.

On the other hand, the chances of crashing and burning were high. Adding a bakery was going to require major new construction and equipment, paid for with hundreds of thousands of dollars in bank loans, a massive financial risk. Of the more than one million new small businesses started every year in the United States, 66% fail within the first ten years.¹ If the store went under, Ranulfo would likely lose his life savings and house—everything he'd worked for his whole life. And the unknowns were as overwhelming as the stakes. Would his customers keep their jobs picking berries, washing dishes, and mowing lawns? Would they like his pastries? How long would that take? Despite his sharp accounting for every dollar in the store, Ranulfo couldn't answer these questions.

Ranulfo's risk-taking fascinated me. It's one thing when someone in their 20s takes a financial risk, but when a father in his 40s with two young kids and a wife puts his family savings on the line—I wouldn't have had the guts to do that. If I paid more than \$10 for a shirt, I usually got overwhelmed with regrets and returned it by the end of the week. I had a steady income and never considered putting my house or savings on the line, so I was hugely impressed that Ranulfo had given up his secure job at the plant nursery to open the corner store with Pablo. Now that the store was finally looking like it would survive, I would have stopped there.