

Book Review

– *Tell Me Why My Children Died: Rabies, Indigenous Knowledge and Communicative Justice*, by Charles Briggs & Clara Martini-Briggs. Duke University Press, 2016.

Tell Me Why My Children Died: Rabies, Indigenous Knowledge, and Communicative Justice by Charles and Clara Marini Briggs, reads by turns like a thriller, a dense theoretical treatise, a work of photo documentary and a call to arms. That it succeeds on all of these fronts is a testament as much to the authors' rigorous scholarship, as it is to their conviction that engagement must take the form of social action in addition to thick description.

The crux of the book is the deaths of 32 children and 6 adults from an unknown disease in a small indigenous community in the Venezuelan rain forest between 2007 and 2008. These were cases that mattered desperately to the families who lost their loved ones, and to the many health providers, community leaders, and researchers who heard their stories and grieved with them, but were ultimately not numerous enough nor of enough importance to matter to government officials and the media.

Throughout the book the authors pursue two questions relentlessly: how did the disease, despite the work of so many talented, empathic and hard-working people, elude diagnosis? And why did the families' plea (rendered by its eponymous title: *Tell me why my children died*) go unheeded? In Part I of the book (Chapters 1-4), a Rashomon-like unfolding of perspectives is used to describe the epidemic from the point of view of the parents of the children and young adults who died, from the point of view of the different doctors, nurses and indigenous healers who treated them, and finally from the standpoint of the journalists and politicians who initially covered the epidemic but eventually lost interest in it. Among the many remarkable aspects of the first half of the book is the care the authors take to give each perspective adequate context and respect; there are rarely holy men or sinister villains in Briggs' telling.

Scattered throughout these sections we also learn of the authors' personal engagement with the epidemic. In the wake of lengthy and increasingly fruitless state governmental inquiries into the strange disease, indigenous leaders, in an extraordinary assertion of power, conceived of their own strategy: they would form a team (including the authors whose decades-long engagement

with the community and skill with government officials perfectly positioned them to help the families who had lost children) and conduct their own investigation of the disease, heading straight to Venezuela's capital, Caracas, with what they found.

Once they set to work, the team settled fairly quickly on the theory that rabies, transmitted by infected bats, was causing the deaths in the community. Armed with detailed information about thirty-eight cases, including photographs of all the families affected by the epidemic, the team arrived in Caracas at the Ministry of Popular Power for Health. In one of the books many documented ironies, the team, including the Briggs, is essentially told to get lost by the very same officials who, toeing the line of Chavez's socialist government, were publically extolling their commitment to providing health care to all Venezuelans and to combating the discrimination of indigenous peoples.

Part II of the book (Chapters 5-9), intervenes on the complicated object it has just unfolded (the epidemic, the rabies diagnosis, parents' grief, a community's anger etc.), by drawing on a dizzying array of social theory including psychoanalysis, narrative theory, science and technology studies and linguistic anthropology. While showcasing the authors' skill in applying nearly all of contemporary anthropology's theoretical frameworks to their work (including a beautiful and ethnographically rich chapter on parents' laments, which the authors argue mourned not only the death of loved ones but also the lack of acknowledgement by government officials) there are times when the book's epistemological claims would seem to contradict one another, a tension that is left unexplored by the authors.

The use of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism is a case in point. Perspectivism, in which different species are viewed as sharing commensurate worldviews, despite their radically different physicalities, is taken up, albeit briefly, to analyse the Myth of the Bat, told by a Warro community member to articulate his discomfort with the theory that rabies-infected bats were responsible for the deaths in his community. Here, the authors suggest that by expanding, rather than pointedly restricting, the range of people participating in knowledge production about the epidemic we open up larger questions such as the possibility of a profound environmental shift occurring in the Venezuelan rainforest. But then toward the end of the book the authors critique the government's rejection of the bat/rabies theory because their sample of bats was 'limited to less than two dozen bats collected on a single night in Santa Rosa de Guayo, hardly an adequate sample to determine that rabies was not and had not been present in the delta' (238). It is left to the reader to determine when accurate epidemiological knowledge is urgently necessary and when it is a hindrance to other kinds of knowledge, such as that emerging from perspectivism.

This tension aside, the book's multi-vocal narratives and evocative photographs ultimately succeed at convincing readers of exactly the truths that indigenous leaders had hoped to persuade their government: that parents of the Venezuelan delta care deeply about their children, that indigenous people have

important knowledge about health to share, and that the world could in fact look different if community members had the right to participate fully in the design, implementation and evaluation of their own health programmes.

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