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Two Ways of Burning a Cotton Field

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

TWO WAYS OF BURNING A COTTON FIELD

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

David James Lindstrom

2018

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by David James Lindstrom, and entitled Two Ways of Burning a Cotton Field, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Debra Dean

Jason Pearl

Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 1, 2018

The thesis of David James Lindstrom is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences
and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic
Development and Dean of the University Graduate
School

Florida International University, 2018

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DEDICATION

For Cintia, Kati, Alex, Alan, Mili, Rita, Piter, Gabi, and all the other beautiful children —
now young men and women — of Escuela Santa Rita, Desvío a Unión, Paraguay.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

TWO WAYS OF BURNING A COTTON FIELD

by

David James Lindstrom

Florida International University, 2018

Miami, Florida

Professor Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

TWO WAYS OF BURNING A COTTON FIELD is an ethnographic memoir concerning the narrator's experiences as a Peace Corps volunteer in Paraguay, South America. The plot is structured around a moral crisis in his rural Paraguayan village. The narrator's neighbor, a man in his late twenties, threatened to kill his partner and her two children. The Paraguayan police were made aware of the situation but did nothing. Peace Corps management also instructed the narrator to do nothing.

In TWO WAYS OF BURNING A COTTON FIELD, this moral crisis is explored within the contexts of post-colonial power structures, including economic and ecologic geographies, intersections of community and government, and the colonial-indigenous language continuum of Paraguay (Spanish-Guaraní). Further, these neighbors' localized trauma is located within historical, colonial trauma. Of particular concern is the role that languages – English, Spanish, and Guaraní – play in constructing power, worldview, and relationships within the village.

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*The world is not comprehensible, but it is embraceable:
through the embracing of one of its beings.*

— *Martin Buber*

PART I: THE CIGAR MAKER

JOPARÁ

A low light appears beyond the moor. We have waited for an hour, and now on the horizon a few palms stand against a dull blue.

The light does nothing to warm my face. The chickens and guinea hens mill about my feet, pecking at kernels that fall from Aparicio's hands. Guaraní polkas play on a tinny radio.

I have no assigned role here. My hands are too weak to break kernels from the cobs. The water is already piping hot and stored in the thermos, for tea, and it is too dark to do anything but feed chickens. Though we never say it, I am here to sit with my friend and watch the sunrise.

“What is this song about?” I ask.

“His wife found out about the mistress,” says Aparicio. “Now she is leaving.” He speaks slowly, searching for words in Spanish.

“There are many like that,” I say.

“There are many mistresses,” says Aparicio, smiling and speaking quickly now in his own language, Guaraní. “That is the Paraguayan man for you,” he says, “*puro*

Paraguayo”—pure Paraguayan. Or I think this is what he says. He speaks *Jopará* – mixed.

Now the blue lightens and snuffs out thousands of weak stars. Still no heat. Above, a diffuse crimson holds the clouds.

“And this song,” I say. “What is this about?” I speak this time in *Jopará*, or rather I try. Perhaps it is closer to Spanish.

Aparicio responds in Guaraní. I hear something about a woman, and corn – *avati* – I recognize this word from a list of crops I have memorized – and rain and children, and love. I smile, say nothing, and hand him the empty tea cup.

A wavering gold ribbon stretches across the eastern sky, but there are few clouds so in moments it will disappear. Below, I see a rutted path by the river, and a fence by the path—both reaching out to the moor by the village of Itã Moroti Guazu. And there are palm trees above, set against the lightening blue.

“How beautiful,” I say. I now forget in which language.

“Do you like polka?” he asks, perhaps misunderstanding me. In the window, a woman is singing about love.

“Yes,” I say, unsure. “But I need help with the words.”

“Soon you will speak Guaraní,” he says. “You are learning quickly.”

“Never like you.”

“Ah, but you already love polka. That is the key to Paraguay.”

BEGINNINGS

I traveled to Paraguay in February of 2006 because I had nearly flunked out of the University of Washington, and no graduate schools would take me. But I did get my diploma. My senior year, free of the Zoloft, I wrote a letter to my adviser, and she let me re-take a few courses. In the end, they gave me a paper with an honorific: "Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry." But the honor felt like a sham: my transcript told the truth.

For a long while, self-deception was routine: I was fine. The assault was in the past. Sometimes I would quickly, forcefully, unthinkingly push an imaginary knife from my throat. I lived alone, was terrified of living with others, wouldn't go to the building where it happened. But I was fine, except a little depressed. And perhaps more Zoloft would help.

Memories of that time – my sophomore year – are hazy. I remember darkness, random obsessions, tension with my parents (things were rarely good there), and my hands shaking from Zoloft – trying to pipet a chemical into a test tube, the end of the pipet wavering, hopping, never going into the tube. And playing with a knife. And calling my parents—hating that. And throwing the knife out my window and onto the roof below.

Then, at twenty two, recovery – not through miraculous therapy, but by trudging to class, and forcing myself to stay in the library until the work was done, and time passing. Of all things, that: Time.

But the transcript could not deceive. Time would not be made to ignore it. And all the paths open before—medical school, a graduate degree in chemistry or English—were, to my view, shut.

Except the Peace Corps.

No minimum GPA was posted on the Peace Corps website. And I spoke Spanish, or thought I did, and my uncle had volunteered.

Two years. When I finished I would be a changed person. Everyone said I would.

Stronger.

Wiser. Traveled. Worldly. I saw adventure there. I saw myself on the Altiplano, like my uncle: high up, shearing sheep under brilliant stars. Or by the Caribbean, floating in warm, bathwater seas.

It almost happened.

"We'd like to offer you a position in Guatemala," said the placement worker, calling from D.C. "Will you take it?"

Guatemala. Land of indigenous peoples, and Lake Atitlan, and Mayan ruins, with beautiful highlands, volcanoes, beaches. It wasn't imagination. I had lived there for six months when I was eleven. That is part of another story.

"Yes," I said. "I will go."

And there was a month to anticipate and pack before they called me again and told me there had been a landslide and the next cohort was canceled, but there was a slot open in Paraguay soon, if I wanted it.

"There's only one problem," said the placement worker. "They speak Guaraní in Paraguay. Spanish, too, but mostly Guaraní."

Not good. I wanted to speak Spanish, learn Spanish—not waste time with an indigenous language.

I asked what would happen if I turned down the placement, and was told they might not offer me another. "Besides," said the placement worker, "we don't encourage people to join the Peace Corps to learn a language."

Yes, you do. It's on your website: Join the Peace Corps. Learn a language. Do you think your recruits want to learn languages in only a general way? That we don't give a damn which languages we actually learn?

I didn't say this.

"Yes, I'll go."

Guaraní. What's that?

Guaraní. Unrelated to Spanish. Tupi-Guaraní Language Family. Accents always on the last syllables of words. No definite articles. Paraguay. 5.5 million people. Sandwiched between Brazil and Argentina. Other facts from the C.I.A. World Factbook. Just stats. Nothing prepares you for the heat, and the flies. Those flies that lay eggs under your toenails? Those are the worst.

LIGHT AND SHADE

It is the heat of the day, and Aparicio and I are walking by the stream which begins in the western mountains and empties into the moor. There are glades where we walk, and shadows, and tiny fish dart in cool water. The current is slow, and everything is dusty. "*Ndaipori oky*," Aparicio says — "No rain."

We are talking about nothing in particular. Guaraní and Spanish float in the air. We make small leaps onto big rocks, cross on logs together, and throw pebbles at the fish.