

GASTÓN R. GORDILLO

Landscapes of Devils

TENSIONS OF PLACE AND MEMORY

IN THE ARGENTINEAN CHACO

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Duke University Press Durham & London

2004

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Printed in the United States of

America on acid-free paper ☺

Designed by C. H. Westmoreland

Typeset in Dante with Cather display

by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-

Publication Data and republication

acknowledgments appear on the last

printed pages of this book.

A mis padres

The philosophy of praxis is absolute “historicism,”
the absolute secularization and earthliness of thought. . . . It is along
this line that one must trace the thread of the new conception
of the world. — Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*

To proceed dialectically means to think in contradictions, for the sake
of the contradiction once experienced in the thing, and against that
contradiction. — Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

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Acknowledgments

I wrote this book about places and memories in a dazzling array of places, which in turn evoke their own memories. The recollection of the many debts accumulated on this journey cannot but begin in the Chaco. The people who are these pages' protagonists are an indissoluble part of who I am today, hence it is difficult to adequately convey the depth of my gratitude. Dionisio Díaz (deceased), Nicanor Jaime (*Nedói*), Secundino Lucas, Pedro Martínez, Marcelo Núñez, Emilio Rivero (*Locohé*), Toribio Sánchez, and Eusebio Solís (*Lagachidí*) have been crucial companions in my ethnographic forays, and in moments of confusion I always counted on their patient, illuminating comments. Their warmth and generosity have been directly proportional to the enjoyment I felt talking with them. Andrés Cardoso (*DariloGo*), Miguel Jaime, Chicho Martín (*Cadácho*), Ramón Morales, and Esteban Moreno (*Táico*) have shared countless conversations and/or numerous hunting and fishing trips with me. It is especially from them that I learned what I know about the experience of Toba men in the bush and the Pilcomayo marshes.

It would be impossible to list here the rest of the Toba who in one way or another contributed with their voices and hospitality to the final outcome of this book. Nonetheless, I must mention Rodolfo Setacain and his wife Marta Moreno (deceased), Mateo Alto, Adolfo Caín, Martín Carlos, Pedro Cuchi, Emilio Cuellar, Celestino Cuellar, Alberto Díaz, José Ernesto, Manuel Estrada, Victor Filemón, Nélida Florentín, Antonio García, Ramón Jaime, Juan Larrea, Nicolás Larrea, Gil Lazarte, Fabreciana Luis, Tita Luis, Mariano Méndez, Luis Mendoza (deceased), Osvaldo Molina, Benigno Morales, Hugo Morales, Susana Morales, Pedro Nagadí, Andrés Pérez, Humberto Pérez, Norma Pérez, Quico Pérez, Santa Pérez, Julio Reginaldo, Orquera Reginaldo, Basilio Roque (deceased), Juan Rosendo (deceased), Evencio Sánchez, Teodoro Segovia, Luisa Segundo, Asuzena Tenaquí (deceased), Valeria Urquiza, Dionisia Yanqui, José Manuel Yanqui, and Mario Zacarías. Throughout this book, I refer to people currently alive with pseudonyms.

In 1987, when I was an anthropology undergraduate at the Universi-

dad de Buenos Aires anxious to learn what fieldwork was all about, Marcela Mendoza took me to the Toba villages for the first time, an experience that changed me forever. I cannot stop thanking her for that. Ever since then, Marcela has provided me with countless insights on Toba culture, memory, and history and shared with me invaluable information and documents. Our exchange of ideas became particularly intense and fruitful when I was completing my dissertation in 1998. Luis María de la Cruz has been my other crucial interlocutor on the Toba, and we had long conversations about some of the topics analyzed in this book. His work among the Toba on land claims and his commitment to indigenous rights have always been a source of inspiration. Additionally, Luis María enormously facilitated my fieldwork by allowing me to use his house in one of the Toba villages. María Lia Bargalló was my companion in four trips to the Toba villages between 1988 and 1991. Our fieldwork experience and her sensitivity shaped the contours of my future research in ways I could then not foresee.

In the city of Formosa, Ana Mosquera was a generous host with whom I shared concerns and projects. José Alsina (deceased) guided me into piles of documents at the Formosa Historical Archives, an institution he rescued from oblivion. Bishops Humberto Axt and David Leake, of the Argentinean Anglican Church, kindly shared memories of their experiences among the Toba. I am especially grateful to David Leake for allowing me to reproduce photos from his family archive.

Colleagues and friends in the Department of Anthropology at the Universidad de Buenos Aires contributed to this book in multiple, intricate ways. It was there — as an undergraduate student, teaching assistant, and graduate research fellow — that I learned what critical thinking is all about. Special thanks to Juan Martín Leguizamón, a brother in arms and a source of inspiration for his commitment to an anthropology grounded in people's concerns. For their intellectual stimulation I am also grateful to Ricardo Abduca, Fernando Balbi, Claudia Briones, Diego Escolar, Valeria Hernández, Leda Kantor, Axel Lazzari, Patricia Monsalve, Carlos Prego, Alejandra Siffredi, Héctor Hugo Trincherro, and Marcelo Urquía.

The Department of Anthropology at the University of Toronto provided the ferment to produce the dissertation that led to this book. I owe to Gavin Smith the motivation to ask the right questions. Richard B. Lee was a fundamental pillar of my subsequent work. It is hard to accurately express the strength of Gavin's and Richard's support as my dissertation coadvisors, how much I learned from them, and how much I

admire them. The 1997–98 dissertation-writing group in Toronto created a weekly space of insightful comments and criticism. Thanks to Andrew Martindale, Robin Oakley, Warren Olivo, Dee Rose, Celia Rothenberg, Heike Schimkat, and Andrew Walsh.

John Comaroff made the most detailed, thorough, and challenging comments I could have ever expected from an external thesis examiner. The richness and scope of his suggestions were critical to redefine this book. The following people, some of them close friends, read parts of the manuscript in its various stages or enriched it with their observations: Arianne Dorval, Michael Lambek, Bill Levitt, Cynthia Milton, Juan Manuel Obarrio, Stuart Philpott, Natacha Pravaz, Valeria Procupez, Paula Pryce, Anke Schwittay, Gerald Sider, Renée Sylvain, Michael Taussig, Claudia Vicencio, and Pablo Wright. My dialogues with Elena Arengo on the intricate histories of the Chaco proved particularly influential. Kari Jones accompanied me through several stages of this manuscript's development and contributed much to it. Tomás Eloy Martínez helped me solve the mystery of Juan Domingo Perón's presence in San Martín del Tabacal, as the Toba currently remember it. In May 1998, my friend and colleague Hernán Julio Vidal passed away in a tragic accident while doing fieldwork in Patagonia. The final chapter owes much to my dialogues with Hernán on the cultural power of international borders.

I wrote and rewrote the revisions during an intense three-year North American tour that took me through New Haven, Cambridge, Ithaca, and Vancouver. As a visiting fellow in the Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University (1999–2000), I had the privilege of enjoying a remarkably stimulating and collegial context in which to rethink, reread, and rewrite. Jim Scott was the legend who made this environment possible. Kay Mansfield's warmth and unconditional support had a lot to do with my fabulous year in Agrarian Studies. My cofellows at Yale critically read several chapters: special thanks to Henry Bernstein, Richard Grove, Cindy Hahamovitch, Jeanette Keith, Joan Martínez-Alier, Scott Nelson, Gabriele Rasuly-Palczek, and Paula Worby. Rohan D'Souza deserves a special mention for asking the unsettling question, for his faith in the revolution, and for his sense of humor and friendship.

I turned around the manuscript, again and again, at Harvard University as a Visiting Scholar in the Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies (2000–2001), at Cornell University as a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology (2001–2002), and finally in Vancouver as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at

the University of British Columbia. Colleagues and friends at these institutions further encouraged me to rethink some of the ideas presented in this book, especially Alexia Bloch, Rima Brusi, Felix Girón, Vince Brown, and Ajantha Subramanian.

Valerie Millholland, my editor at Duke University Press, supported this manuscript from the time I first contacted her. The two reviewers for the press provided me with a careful and thought-provoking reading that helped me tighten and improve the argument. Special thanks to Tania Li ("reader number two," as I learned later) for her challenging remarks on the conceptual, stylistic, and ethnographic knots I needed to untangle. Lynn Walterick's copy-editing skills saved me from those cryptic sentences and inconsistencies I thought I had left behind.

My parents Teresa Ana Schiaffino and Agustín Gordillo, their partners Ricardo López Alfonsino and Mónica Merlín, and my siblings Hernán, Camila, and Bárbara are all an important part of these pages. Mariano Cerdá and Javier Iñón know better than anybody the personal circumstances in which, over the years, I set out for the Chaco. Their friendship was a crucial part of my experience in the field. Florencia Esteverena was the immensely loving and patient light that helped me lead this manuscript through turbulent waters.

Fieldwork for this research was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (Predoctoral grant no. 6503), the Universidad de Buenos Aires (Secretaría de Ciencia y Técnica), the University of Toronto (Connaught Foundation and School of Graduate Studies), and the Ministry of Education and Training of the Province of Ontario. My sincere gratitude to these institutions.

There is someone I never met but to whom I am also indebted: Alfred Métraux, who did fieldwork among the Toba in 1933 and 1939. Encapsulating the experience of many of us who love the Chaco intensely but often wish to find relief from its implacable geography, he wrote in 1939 in two parts of his diary: *Le Chaco est difficile à décrire, mais j'en aime tous les aspects. . . . J'en veux à cette radio qui m'arrache du Chaco.* — The Chaco is hard to describe, but I love everything about it. . . . I resent that radio that pulls me out of the Chaco.

Landscapes of Devils

Introduction

The dialectic . . . is a logical absurdity as long as there is talk of the change of one “thing” into another “thing.” . . . That is to say, its premise is that *things should be shown to be aspects of processes*. . . . Thus the knowledge that social facts are not objects but relations between men is intensified to the point where facts are wholly dissolved into processes.

—Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*

The western Argentinean Chaco is dominated by a landscape that is flat, monotonous, and often overwhelming: *el monte*, the bush. The dirt roads that cut through the region are surrounded by forest and often look like frail marks of human presence trying to prevent nature from fully taking over. Wherever one looks, the thick succession of hardwoods, cacti, and shrubs, six to twelve meters high, extends like a mantle over a dry, dusty soil. In the northwest of the province of Formosa, one of the hinterland roads ends near the border with Paraguay, where a dozen Toba villages are scattered south of the marshlands formed by the Pilcomayo River. These hamlets momentarily break the dominance of the bush yet are also subordinated to its unyielding presence. From every household, while chatting next to a fire, making handicrafts, or preparing food, women and men can see the mass of vegetation surrounding them. Most of them enter the bush often to gather honey, wild fruits, or firewood, to hunt, visit their fields, or go fishing in the marshes. And many of their memories, anecdotes, and conversations hinge in one way or another on this place. Yet despite its sheer presence, people remember that the bush did not exist in the past. When they refer to their ancestors, who roamed those same lands in foraging bands prior to their defeat by the Argentinean army and the arrival of Criollo settlers in the 1910s, they emphasize that they inhabited a world of wide grasslands, free of forest.

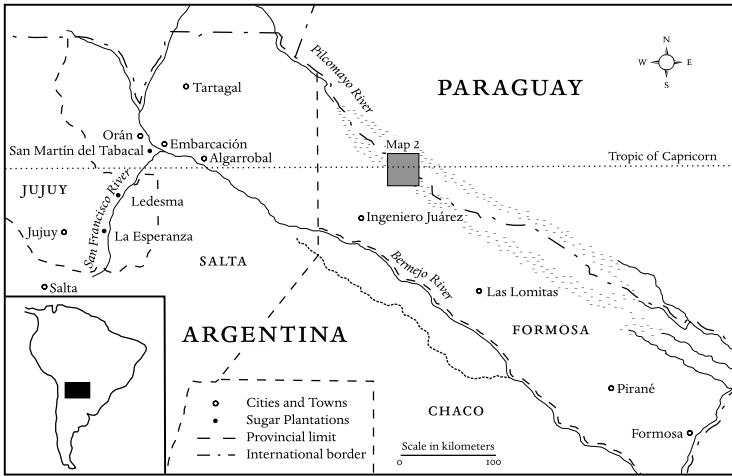
These memories remind many Toba that the bush is not simply a



1. Bush trail in Toba lands. *Photo by author.*

natural component of the landscape but a historical product intrinsically linked to their incorporation within the Argentinean nation-state and their demise as a politically autonomous group. This history has constituted Toba subjectivity and produced the local geography, in a process in which the forces that made the Toba what they are today are the same that created the bush. This entanglement of space, history, and subjectivity involved not just the Chaco interior but also practices that connected the emerging bush with other geographies. In the early twentieth century, state violence, settler colonization, and the consolidation of a capitalist frontier 300 kilometers to the west drew the Toba and other indigenous groups into the orbit of sugar plantations as a seasonal labor force. This pattern of migration was a further and potent force in the making of the bush, as the place where people constructed a relative haven from labor exploitation yet also as the site deprived of commodities that fostered their annual return to the sugar cane fields.

In the mid and late 1990s, Toba men and women had stopped working at the plantations but their memories of “the mountains”—*kahogonaGá*, as they refer to the cane fields because of their location next to the first Andean ranges—were a forceful presence in their lands.¹ These memories remind most Toba that the spatial product of their immersion within a capitalist political economy, the bush, is also the place where they carved out relative shelter from it. The spatial sedimentation of this tension between exploitation and relative autonomy emerges in many aspects of Toba practice and subjectivity, among them the devil imageries that, in



Map 1. Relative location of the Toba

contrasting ways, impregnate the memory of the plantations and current experiences of the bush. As we shall see, the action of devils captures some of the major social contradictions constituting these geographies.

In this book I unravel the historical experiences, tensions, and places that have produced the bush as a contested social process. My premise is that places are produced in tension with other geographies and that these tensions are made tangible through the spatialization of memory. These spatial connections turn places, as Doreen Massey has argued, into processes that are necessarily “extroverted”: that is, open to “a constellation of social relations meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” (1994:154, 142, 155). The constellation of social relations meeting to configure the bush links it not only to the sugar plantations but also to other places through a complex network of practices and memories. Some of these sites had by the 1990s disappeared; others had emerged only recently. Yet all of them were tied to the memory of the mountains and the grasslands in the making of the bush. In this study, I examine how these places have been constituted by state terror, Anglican missionization, disease and labor exploitation, healing and shamanism, sexuality, commodity fetishism, state hegemony, and practices of accommodation and resistance. Devil imageries, and the contradictory forms of estrangement and reciprocity they evoke, are one of the main threads weaving through the spatialization of these experiences.

The Absolute Spatialization of Practice

Influenced by the prioritization of time over space that has dominated Western philosophy since the Enlightenment, most anthropological studies of social memory have tended to focus on the temporal aspects of remembering: that is, on constructions of the past and their cultural, ideological, or political dimensions (e.g., Abercrombie 1998; Cole 2001; Lambek 1996; Rappaport 1990; Swedenburg 1991; Trouillot 1995).² And those who have conceptually tackled the spatial components of memory, for their part, have usually done so from a phenomenological perspective that overlooks the role of power relations and history in the making of senses of place (see Basso 1996; Casey 1987, 1996; Feld 1996).³

In this book I merge the experiential dimensions of place making with the political economy that makes it possible by examining the materiality of memory, its embodiment in practice, and its constitution as a social force in the production of places. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci advocated a theory of practice grounded in what he called, in opposition to idealism and objectivist materialism, the “absolute secularization and earthliness of thought” (1971:465). Here I expand this earthliness to include what I would call the absolute spatialization of practice. My analytical point of departure is the fact that every memory is, in a fundamental way, the memory of a place. Faces, casual encounters, or collective struggles are remembered not in a vacuum but in a locale that makes them meaningful. And this spatiality is crucial for an anthropological understanding of memory. This process does not involve memories unfolding on an arrested spatial matrix but a dynamic process of place production. Henri Lefebvre (1991) has forcefully argued that our gaze should move away from “things in space” (space as a rigid template) and toward *the production of space* (space as the *product* of action). This means, first, conceiving of memory as a component of practice involved in place making and, second, integrating Toba memories with the historical practices that have produced the bush physically, politically, and culturally.

My analysis draws on recent scholarship in anthropology and geography that has examined how places are historically made and unmade through practice, fields of power and struggle, and networks of social relations (see Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Harvey 1989, 1996, 2000, 2001; Massey 1994; Mitchell 1996; Moore 1998; Raffles 1999, 2002; Rodman 1992; N. Smith 1984; Stewart 1996). Yet in these pages

I examine an often-overlooked aspect of place making: that places are the result of the social contradictions embedded in them. The study of these contradictions is crucial to dismantle the appearance of places as well-bounded entities, for it reveals, first, the fractures and struggles that make them ongoing, unstable, and unfinished historical processes and, second, the relations that integrate them with other geographies.

In Toba historical experience, the most recurrent tension shaping local landscapes is the one opposing wage labor to hunting, fishing, and gathering. Henri Lefebvre (1991: 365) argued that social contradictions create spatial contradictions. Likewise, the contradiction between what most Toba call *marisca* (foraging) and *trabajo* (work) expresses a tension between different social relations of production and experiences that have produced places of relative autonomy in the bush and places of exploitation on plantations and (more recently) farms.⁴ Even though this tension is central to my argument, I do not analyze it in a bipolar fashion (or as the expression of a “dual economy”); rather, I examine it as the uneven spatial manifestation of a single social practice that involves further contradictions and multiple geographies and, for that reason, undermines a clear-cut distinction between neatly bounded places. As we shall see, the foundation of an Anglican station in Toba lands in 1930, where British missionaries banned dances and other practices regarded as immoral, turned the sugar plantations into places of sexual excess free of missionary discipline. Similarly, the nostalgia that in the mid-1990s many Toba expressed for the commodities earned at the plantations, as well as the availability of public-sector jobs in the nearby municipality, informed perceptions that the bush was a place of poverty, hardship, and unrewarding efforts. These dimensions illustrate that places are processes riddled with tensions and anticipate some of the multisited practices examined in chapters to come.

My approach to labor contradictions, rather than being based on an objectivist approach to production, fully immerses them in social subjectivity. This book draws on the work of a growing number of authors who, critical of reified and ahistorical notions of culture, have examined the dynamism of cultural production in particular historical and political settings (Comaroff 1985; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997, 1999; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Roseberry 1989; Sider 1986; Smith 1991, 1999). In these pages, I analyze cultural meanings as they are produced by historical experiences. My use of this concept follows the legacy of Edward Thompson (1966; 1978a; 1978b), who has examined collective experiences that are as subjective as they are the product of fields of domination and confront-

tation. This historical notion of experience is critical to account for the cultural and spatial dimensions of practice, for it is *through* experience that history leaves a mark on memory and guides action in the production of places. Experience, in other words, is both a product and a creative force, in a process in which, as Raymond Williams put it, subjectivity is “under continual pressure from experience” (1961:101; see 1977:166).⁵

My reference to contradictions tearing through places and labor experiences requires a brief clarification of my understanding of the dialectic, which will nevertheless become clear only as my historical and ethnographic narrative progresses. One of the most widespread misconceptions about the dialectic is that it involves an “interaction” between *separate* entities in which they “shape each other.”⁶ Being a practice that undermines reified dichotomies, the dialectic in fact dismantles the very idea of interplay between separate “things.” As Georg Lukács writes, the premise of the dialectic is that “*things should be shown to be aspects of processes*” and as a result “the knowledge that social facts are not objects but relations between men is intensified to the point where facts are wholly dissolved into processes” (1971:179–80, emphasis in original; see Adorno 1973:145). Similarly, I aim to show that places such as the bush, the plantations, or the mission station are eminently *relations* between social actors and that these relations dissolve these places’ appearance of fixity. Yet my approach is not simply relational; it is dialectical in the sense that it takes these relations to unleash confrontations and oppositions. Among the Toba, such contradictions emerge in a spatialized habitus constituted by memory.

Of Places, Embodied Memories, and Devils

The people whose experiences, memories, and practices I examine in this book live in the west of the Gran Chaco region: a mostly semiarid plain that covers southeastern Bolivia, western Paraguay, and a good part of northern Argentina.⁷ Also known as Toba-Pilagá (Métraux 1937) and western Toba (Mendoza 2002),⁸ they form a group of 1,600 people historically and linguistically distinct from other Toba groups in Argentina, which live farther east and encompass a total population of about 30,000 (Arengo 1996; Cordeu and Siffredi 1971; Miller 1975, 1979, 1995, 1999; Wright 1992, 1997).⁹ Eastern and western Toba use the term *Toba* to refer to themselves (“big forehead” in Guaraní, which refers to the now-abandoned practice of shaving their foreheads) and share the self-denomination *Qom* (people).

Yet these groupings have been constituted as social subjects through different historical experiences (examined in chapter 2). Unless stated otherwise, all future mention of “the Toba” indicates the western Toba.

During my fieldwork, the memories of the sugar plantations, the mission, or the grasslands were recurrent occurrences in my conversations with people and in the daily interactions I observed in households, public places, farming camps, or bush trails. On numerous occasions I would hear elder men and women remembering past experiences as part of long monologues. Some children would listen next to them and adults would often pay attention from the distance and make comments or ask questions while conducting other activities. These moments of memory production were particularly important in the early morning hours around the household fire, when family members gather to share a *mate* (a type of tea common in Argentina). At political meetings, it was also common to hear men insert memories within longer harangues about contemporary concerns. In addition to these everyday and relatively spontaneous sites of memory production, the Anglican services in local adobe churches provided more ritualized sites of commemoration. Sermons by Toba priests often hinged on the remembrance of the mission—destroyed by flooding in 1975—and the un-Christian, violent landscapes that dominated the region prior to its foundation.

While taping or making notes of memories in interviews or casual interactions, I repeatedly tried to locate the events being remembered in time. Yet dates were of little or no meaning to most people. It took me a while to realize that this responded not just to a cultural disregard for calendar time but to the weight of places in memory. As several chapters illustrate, what made these memories significant were, rather than their temporal coordinates, the geographies they evoked.¹⁰ Places made these memories significant in another way: through the fact that they were produced at particular sites—the villages, the bush, and the marshes—and at a particular moment in the configuration of those sites: the mid and late 1990s.¹¹ This location profoundly shaped the memories I registered in the field and made them part of debates and concerns specific to that moment in their history, such as those triggered by the incipient social differentiation dividing the largest villages.¹² The spatialization of memory was also apparent in people’s bodies. Memories were not only narrated or created ritually but also embodied in what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) has called “habitus”: a set of dispositions for action. Differently constructed according to age, social status, and gender, the cultural sedimentation of

Toba historical experience has turned past memories into new values and patterns of behavior, in a process in which the marks memory leaves on the habitus remain when the remembrance of the experience that originated it may not (cf. Casey 1987; Connerton 1989). This embodiment is critical to place making, for as pointed out by Lefebvre (1991:162), “it is by means of the body that space is perceived, lived and produced.”

The spirits the Toba call *payák* or *diablos*, devils, are probably the best illustration of the inscription of memory in their habitus and of the cultural and spatial significance of labor contradictions; for this reason, they are one of the main themes articulating different geographies throughout the book. For women and men, young and old, committed to the Anglican Church or critical of it, devils are a latent yet persistent presence in their lives. They are the dominant nonhuman presence in the places central to their practice and memories. Yet these spirits’ behavior, features, and type of interaction with humans are deeply contingent on their location. The term *payák* represents for most Toba the condition of potentially dangerous creatures or phenomena that cannot be fully explained or understood and therefore people often use the term as an adjective (see Métraux 1937:174; 1946a:16). For instance, creatures such as *wosáq* (“rainbow” and the storms associated with it) or seemingly natural phenomena like *kadáachi* (whirlwinds) have or may have a *payák* nature. Yet this state is most graphically condensed in the beings—usually invisible but that can adopt changing physical shapes, like that of a hairy dwarf—which people also refer to by the term *payák*.¹³ In fact, most people use this term in this sense: as synonymous with evil spirit.

Most Toba incorporated the term *diablo* as translation of *payák* through their experience of Anglican missionization. As part of a dualistic opposition between good and evil originally alien to local values, missionaries presented the Devil as the epitome of evil and emphasized that diabolical forces were behind practices at odds with the Gospels (as we shall see). Even though most Toba did not adopt the Christian idea of the Devil at face value, as a singular and distant entity, their interactions with the missionaries gradually enhanced the negative features associated with *payák* creatures, now seen as *diablos*. This merger between Christian imageries and figures prior to missionization was in turn reconfigured by the experience of labor migration and the contradictions it entailed.

During the decades Toba men and women worked at the cane fields, they saw the plantations as places haunted by scores of devils that were

sources of terror, disease, and death, established no communication with humans, and made their alienation in those sites particularly apparent. The sedimentation of that memory of terror in their habitus, together with the articulation of different practices and social relations in their lands, enhanced the reciprocity that links foragers to bush devils, which are seen by contrast (despite their often whimsical behavior) as sources of bush food and healing power. As a result of this contradictory experience of place, in different sites the *payák* adopt heterogeneous features related to the labor practices, social relations, and tensions embedded in the landscape. The devils' behavior informs how people relate to places, and this bodily predisposition is, I will show, inseparable from social memory. The *diablos*, in short, capture some of the spatial contrasts created by decades of labor migration, and this introductory outline anticipates some of the conceptual and ethnographic knots I tackle in chapters to come.

On Epistemology and Method

When I set out to conduct the research that led to this study, my broadest aim was to overcome the dichotomy between objectivism and subjectivism by showing that the objectivity of places results from the historical and subjective forces that are behind it, a point inspired by Antonio Gramsci's insistence that "objective" should be understood as *humanly* objective and "subjective" as *historically* subjective (1971: 446). If I accomplished this goal in any way, I believe it was mostly possible because I began my Chaco journeys with an "objectivist moment" that examined the fields of force in which social action is immersed.

I conducted fieldwork among the Toba on numerous occasions, involving different but closely interrelated research projects that span some fifteen years. Between 1987 and 1993—first as an anthropology undergraduate and then as a graduate research fellow at the Universidad de Buenos Aires—I spent a total of seven months in the Toba villages and worked on a perspective in political economy that examined the historical constraints imposed on people's everyday forms of livelihood (see Gorrillo 1992, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1996). Concerned as I was with issues of labor, domination, and history overlooked in Chaco ethnography, "culture" was at the time tangential to my research. Yet as I gradually became interested in subjectivity, memory, and place, my previous work proved

vital for understanding these issues and, further, for trying to dissolve the very distinction between “political economy” and “culture” as separate analytical fields.

In September 1993 I headed to the University of Toronto to pursue graduate work and process this epistemological transition. In August 1995 I returned for eighteen months to Argentina and the Toba villages to conduct the fieldwork and the archival and library research for my dissertation. In June 1996 I visited other places central in Toba experiences and memories: a farm near Embarcación (Salta)—where I met a group of Toba men and women working as harvesters—and San Martín del Tabacal, the sugar plantation that absorbed most of their labor migrations in the twentieth century. When I was writing and revising the manuscript first in Canada and then the United States, I returned to the Toba villages in August 1997, May 1999, and June–July 2000 (for a total of ten weeks) to wrap up final aspects of the research. Most of my conversations and everyday interactions involved men but the dozen interviews I conducted with women allowed me to explore experiences, memories, and areas of contention shaped along gender lines.

The three parts into which I divide the book can be considered moments in a movement that is simultaneously historical, spatial, and analytical. Because of the myriad relations I try to establish between different geographies, my narrative opens up various levels of analysis and works on their manifold interpenetrations as the chapters unfold. This book is eminently historical in the sense that I accompany people’s memories on a journey that is as geographical as it is cultural and material. Believing that history is not just “the past” but the social forces that have produced *the present*, my narrative immerses the reader into the deep history that has created the memories I registered in the field. But I do so through an approach that, while committed to a rigorous historiography, tries to break down an objectivist distinction between memory (what “they” think happened) and history (what “really” happened).

Part I, “The Making of the Bush,” integrates processes old enough to escape Toba social memory with the more recent events that led to the Anglican evangelization, the end of “the time of the ancient ones,” and the emergence of the bush as a new geography. The making of Toba lands (as parts II and III show) is a process that continues in the present, yet these chapters examine how the bush was initially produced, physically and socially, by new experiences of confrontation. I begin by presenting

the current layout of the places examined in the book and move on to analyze the historical forces that, from the Spanish colonial era to the early twentieth century, configured the Chaco and in particular Toba territory as places fractured by violence, subjugation, and resistance. After analyzing current memories of the first migrations to the sugar plantations and the clashes with the Argentinean army, I examine how the foundation of the Anglican mission created a refuge from state terror but also a place subjected to a new type of discipline. Present-day memories, I argue, illustrate that missionization triggered a politicized spatiality that configured the bush and the mission in tension with each other and also in contrast with the plantations.

Part II, "Bones in the Cane Fields," takes the reader to the foot of the Andes and in particular to San Martín del Tabacal. I first analyze the history of this plantation and the memories of the ethnic hierarchies and power relations that regulated Toba labor until mechanization put an end to their migrations in the late 1960s. Then I examine the death, disease, and terror many Toba project onto the cane fields, epitomized in devils and cannibals, and the simultaneous memories of money and commodities that turned San Martín del Tabacal into an alluring yet ultimately alienating place of wealth. The following two chapters focus on the fields of contention produced on the plantation, first, through the evening dances that defined this place in opposition to the mission, and second, through the forms of resistance that, even though challenging exploitation, ultimately reinforced people's estrangement at the cane fields.

In Part III, "Foraging until the End of the World," I analyze how the memories presented in the previous two parts coalesce in the cultural and political geography of the bush. First, I examine how the health, resilience, local knowledge, poverty, and noncommodified abundance most Toba associate with the bush are produced in tension with the memory of the disease, estrangement, and wealth projected onto the sugar plantations. I also examine these features in conjunction with the legacy of Anglican missionization and the action of the bush devils, as they are defined in contrast with the plantation devils. Second, I explore how recent labor migrations to farms and cattle ranches have affected the social configuration of the bush and how, in turn, work in these places is haunted by the memory of San Martín del Tabacal. I then analyze, intertwined with these practices and memories, the way in which people living in poverty have reproduced the collective use of the bush through struggles and negotia-

tions with settlers, stage agencies, and their own leaders, a process that in the 1990s was creating new fractures in the local landscape. As part of my final articulation of disparate geographies, the last chapter examines how the bush is also made in relation to lands that, located across the Pilcomayo marshes, evoke the memory of landscapes of freedom.