

GARCIA MARQUEZ,
VARGAS LLOSA,
AND LITERARY CRITICISM:
Looking Back Prematurely

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NOVEL LIVES: THE FICTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHERS OF GUILLERMO CABRERA INFANTE AND MARIO VARGAS LLOSA. By Rosemary Geisdorfer-Feal. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986. Pp. 175. \$12.00 paper.)

GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ AND THE POWERS OF FICTION. Edited by Julio Ortega. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988. Pp. 96. \$14.95.)

GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ. By Raymond Leslie Williams. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984. Pp. 176. \$17.95.)

MARIO VARGAS LLOSA. By Raymond Leslie Williams. (New York: Ungar Publishing, 1986. Pp. 230. \$16.95.)

Of all the writers associated with the Latin American "boom," Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa are the names best known to the general public. Their work has also been studied extensively by scholars and critics around the world, producing a body of critical writing that could fill many library shelves. As a result, the nonspecialist reader interested in a particular aspect of these authors' works is likely to feel lost in this literary jungle, which has continued to proliferate for the last twenty years. This review essay will examine some of the recent works devoted to these two authors.

Gabriel García Márquez

The phenomenal success of *Cien años de soledad* in 1967 (published in English as *A Hundred Years of Solitude*) placed García Márquez at the forefront of Spanish American fiction and provoked what Mario Vargas Llosa termed "a literary earthquake throughout Latin America." The waves created by this commotion soon reached other shores and led to many works of Latin American fiction being widely translated, read, and admired. Yet García Márquez's best-seller was no accidental feat but

rather the culmination of a long process. *Cien años de soledad* is actually the product of a long literary tradition that includes Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Juan Rulfo, and many others. But the novel also resulted from a long literary apprenticeship begun by García Márquez many years earlier.

Raymond Leslie Williams's *Gabriel García Márquez* analyzes the way in which García Márquez's fiction has developed over his writing career. Williams follows the "life and works" format characteristic of the Twayne series on world authors, a difficult task for any critic because of several problems inherent in this kind of work. In the first place, the scholar is supposedly writing for an educated public but is nevertheless forced to state a series of facts that are presumably general knowledge (such as the titles of books and the plots of the most representative works). Moreover, the scholar must cover all the author's works in this kind of study. The result is often a mere glossing of the works under examination, with little critical analysis put forth. Another problem encountered in this subgenre is the danger of overemphasizing the biographical data by concentrating the entire work on such facts. Finally, any critical work attempting to provide a "complete" survey of a living author becomes incomplete as soon as the subject publishes a new book.

Reviewing this kind of study is also difficult. Such works are easy to criticize for all the reasons just mentioned. Yet everyone needs reference books that will provide the dates of specific events or the titles of lesser known works. Moreover, the reviewer must take care not to fall into the same traps that imperil the scholar who undertakes to write such a work. I have decided to follow a chronological sequence and to relate Williams's book to the critical articles on specific aspects of García Márquez's literary production found in Julio Ortega's *Gabriel García Márquez and the Power of Fiction*.

Overall, Williams is to be commended for going beyond the limitations of the "life and works" format. His study avoids some of the pitfalls mentioned by examining the social and political realities of García Márquez's Colombia and demonstrating how this context has become an integral component of García Márquez's writing.

Most of the stories that García Márquez wrote between 1947 and 1955 are seldom read or translated and have been generally ignored by the critics. According to Williams, these stories nevertheless reveal a writer experimenting with literature and exploring narrative possibilities. This "learning period" culminated in García Márquez's first short novel, *La hojarasca* (published in English *Leafstorm and Other Stories*), which was written during 1950–51 but was not published until 1955. The first of the Macondo novels, *La hojarasca* initiated a second period in García Márquez's literary life that would lead to *Cien años de soledad*. *La hojarasca* introduces some of the situations and characters that were to reappear in García Márquez's later fiction, including Colonel Aureliano Buendía and

the banana plantation that transformed Macondo. It is also a highly experimental novel. As Williams points out, "Even without being aware of García Márquez's direct Faulknerian connection, the techniques most apparently adopted from foreign authors are the use of the structure and point of view from *As I Lay Dying*" (p. 32). Despite the many political themes presented in this novel, García Márquez was criticized by many of his Colombian friends who thought that his book had no political value. After all, Colombia was in the middle of a civil war between conservatives and liberals, *La Violencia*, that was destroying the country. The result, as Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat observes, was that "García Márquez temporarily abandoned the elaborate language and construction of *Leafstorm* in order to write *engagé* literature" (Ortega collection, p. 17).

The direct results of this change in attitude were three openly political books: a collection of short stories entitled *Los funerales de la Mamá Grande* (1962, translated as *Big Mama's Funeral*) and two novels: *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba* in 1961 (published in English as *No One Writes to the Colonel*) and *La mala hora* in 1962 (the English publication entitled *In Evil Hour*). The social, political, and economic aspects of these books are covered by Williams in a basically descriptive approach that stresses the way in which the reader receives a message that is easily decoded through the variety of "voices" presented in the narratives. Gutiérrez Mouat goes further in his contribution to the Ortega collection. Using recent literary and economic theory, Gutiérrez Mouat explores the role of money (or other artifacts used for a similar purpose) and how it affected the structure of the two novels. Money is a symbolic object whose value is determined by the user, and its nature is thus highly representational. By analyzing the relationship between money and writing (also a symbolic and representational activity), Gutiérrez Mouat illuminates the way in which the political message implicit in both novels determined the way in which García Márquez structured his narratives and how this message is received by the reader.

Williams comments as he begins to discuss *Cien años de soledad* that the novel "is an utter joy to read yet, paradoxically, an elusive book to write about" (p. 69). Perhaps it is the elusiveness of the text that has lent itself to multiple critical readings and interpretations, which range from the strictly formalistic to the purely speculative. This plethora of interpretations is hardly surprising, however, given the open-ended nature of the novel and its epic dimension. Indeed, while recounting the story of the Buendía family in the mythical town of Macondo, García Márquez's narrative posits a series of questions about space, time, narrative voices, and other literary questions. To cite only one example of varying interpretations, Roberto González Echevarría argued in a seminal article that the novel as a literary genre is modern not only chronologically but because "it has persisted for centuries without a poetics, always in de

fiance of the very notion of genre."¹ The significance to the present discussion is that González Echevarría's theoretical commentary is based on his reading of *Cien años de soledad*, pointing again to the multiplicity of meanings that can be derived from reading this text.

From the first sentence of the narrative onward, the reader must deal with the seemingly contradictory voices of tradition and renewal: "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember the distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice." Julio Ortega's perceptive essay analyzes these two voices at play from the onset. A traditional fable would start "Once upon a time," setting the narrative clearly in the past. The reader of *Cien años de soledad*, however, is asked to imagine a future that is located in the past. Moreover, the narrative that supposedly chronicles the life of a family (following a chronological pattern) starts by breaking that very chronology by forcing the reader to enter into fable-time, where the past "already belongs to the future—to the 'later' where the Colonel, remembering, awaits us as he faces the firing squad" (Ortega collection, p. 2). Thus time in *Cien años de soledad* becomes circular in a dual but complementary fashion: time of memory and time of prophecy, or the beginning combined with the end, the genesis with the apocalypse, recounted and prophesied at the same time by the mythical Melquíades, the gypsy who writes the story of the Buendía family.

But *Cien años* is not limited to mythical time and reality because the narrative should not be divorced from the Colombian reality that surrounded its writing. Many of the situations and characters in the novel can be readily identified with their historical counterparts. Williams points out that Colonel Aureliano Buendía is based on General Rafael Uribe Uribe, a liberal soldier who fought continually for more than eighteen years, lost nearly all of his battles, and was finally forced to sign the Treaty of Neerlandia in 1902. Similarly, the arrival of the United Fruit Company in Colombia at the end of the nineteenth century wrought radical change in the life of the country. Exploitation of the workers led to the 1928 strike, which culminated in the gruesome massacre that left over a thousand persons dead, as recounted in *Cien años de soledad*. As Williams concludes, "It could well be that the most appropriate description of Colombia's history is in terms of the fantastic" (p. 82). Perhaps García Márquez has discovered the only way to write the history of a country marked by so much violence and abuse.

If *Cien años de soledad* reflects García Márquez's deep concern with Colombian reality, *El otoño del patriarca* (1975, published in English as *The Autumn of the Patriarch*) deals with Latin America in general. In the only

1. Roberto González Echevarría, "Cien años de soledad: The Novel as Myth and Archive," *MLN*, Hispanic Issue (Spring 1984):359.

novel that he published in the 1970s, García Márquez addresses a recurring problem in Latin America—military dictators and the abuse of political power. Curiously enough, García Márquez's novel is one of three on this topic that appeared in consecutive years, following Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo El Supremo* (*I, the Supreme*) in 1974 and preceding Alejo Carpentier's *El recurso del método* (*Reason of State*) in 1976.²

Michael Palencia-Roth's contribution to the Ortega collection explores *El otoño del patriarca* in terms of intertextuality, or the way in which one text is constructed by using another.³ According to Palencia-Roth, three main figures are employed in the novel for different purposes: "García Márquez uses Julius Caesar to explore the concept of power; Christopher Columbus, issues of political and cultural imperialism; and Rubén Darío, questions of aesthetics and the literary life in relation to the aged dictator" (p. 35). Palencia-Roth explores the texts that García Márquez uses to incorporate these figures into his narrative—Plutarch, Suetonius, the *Diary* of Columbus, and Darío's poetry—and thus demonstrate his mastery of the literary craft. Julius Caesar and Columbus are clearly related to the theme of the novel, but Darío's presence merits some explanation. According to Palencia-Roth, García Márquez included the "poet of America" in the text—as a character and by quoting his verses—to pay homage to the first twentieth-century Spanish American writer whose literary works influenced the way that poets in Spain wrote. It should also be recalled that many Latin American presidents and dictators have been poets and writers. Thus literature has not necessarily been a "subversive" activity in Latin America but rather a reaffirmation of the power of the elite, the few lucky enough to have time to read and write.⁴

Following a six-year hiatus, García Márquez published his next novel in 1981, *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (translated into English as *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*). This short and intriguing narrative allowed the writer to display his narrative mastery while continuing his meditation on the novel as a genre. The title of the work clearly pertains to journalism, a category of writing that García Márquez has never ceased to practice.⁵ At first reading, *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* seems simple, but this first impression proves to be deceptive. The story is based on an actual event that happened in 1951: an innocent young man was mis-

2. On these novels, see Roberto González Echevarría, "The Dictatorship of Rhetoric / The Rhetoric of Dictatorship: Carpentier, García Márquez, and Roa Bastos," *LARR* 15, no. 3 (1980): 205–38; and *The Voice of the Masters* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

3. Palencia-Roth's article is an adaptation of one chapter of his excellent *Gabriel García Márquez: la línea, el círculo y las metamorfosis del mito* (Madrid: Gredos, 1983).

4. For an interesting discussion of the role that education has played in Latin America, see Angel Rama, *La ciudad letrada* (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1984).

5. García Márquez's journalistic writing has been compiled in a series of three volumes entitled *Obra periodística* (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1982).

takenly killed by the two brothers of a woman he had supposedly dishonored. Although García Márquez follows the “real” facts, the reader should not accept the novel as a piece of journalistic writing. In the words of Gonzalo Díaz-Migoyo (another contributor to the Ortega volume), “*Chronicle of a Death Foretold* does not, despite factual coincidence, lose its fictitious and unanswerable character. It is an account no less imaginary for being faithful to the facts and, conversely, no less historical for being a work of the imagination” (p. 75). Perhaps the work’s most important quality is that it forces the reader to reconsider the thin line dividing life from fiction. In doing so, it asks the reader to reexamine basic assumptions about writing, literature, and the issues of authority (intra- and extratextual) that are related to these activities. Aníbal González’s lucid essay in the Ortega collection concludes, “Through his canny use of journalistic discourse in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, García Márquez manages to reveal the humble, threadbare origins of narrative in gossip, conjecture, and the petty details of life, as well as narrative’s dependence on belief . . . to achieve the authority and power it wields over its readers” (p. 71).⁶

Raymond Williams’s monograph and the articles in Julio Ortega’s collection stop at this point in García Márquez’s literary career. But the novelist himself has published two more novels in the 1980s: *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* in 1985 (already a best-seller in English as *Love in the Time of Cholera*) and *El general en su laberinto* in 1989 (not yet translated into English). The first novel, a long, lyrical meditation on love that shows García Márquez’s mastery of language and its possibilities, has already received much critical attention.⁷ The second work, however, merits at least some brief comments. *El general en su laberinto* represents García Márquez’s first “historical” novel in the sense that it deals with historical characters based on historical documents. The novel recounts the last eight months of Simon Bolívar’s life, including his last journey along the Magdalena River to Cartagena, Santa Marta, and his death. García Márquez acknowledges the difficulties he faced when writing this work in an appendix, where he lists the names of historians, geographers, linguists, and even astronomers who helped him maintain historical accuracy in his narration. The text, however, is fiction.

The journey down the river is marked by a progressive disintegration of El Libertador. His body slowly disintegrates and his clothes have to

6. See also the excellent article by Gustavo Pellón, “Myth, Tragedy, and the Scapegoat Ritual in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*,” *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 12, no. 3 (Spring 1988):392–413.

7. See, for example, Alfred MacAdam, “Realism Restored,” *Review: Latin American Literature and Art* 35 (July–Dec. 1985):34–38; José Miguel Oviedo, “*El amor en los tiempos del cólera* de Gabriel García Márquez,” *Vuelta* 10, no. 114 (May 1986):33–38; and Julio Ortega, “Gabriel García Márquez y Mario Vargas Llosa, imitados,” *Revista Iberoamericana* 52, no. 137 (Oct.–Dec. 1986):971–78.

be repeatedly altered to fit him. At the same time, his dream of a unified Spanish America is also disintegrating. A significant moment occurs when Bolívar arrives at the town of Honda. The governor of the province organizes an official reception in the general's honor, despite his illness. In an act of homage, a young girl begins to recite José Joaquín Olmedo's poem honoring the victorious Libertador. When the girl's memory falters, Bolívar himself has to remind her of the next two lines, which ring with irony in view of the general's sad condition: "The glimmer of his sword / is the clear reflection of his glory."

El general en su laberinto forces the reader to reexamine the boundaries between fiction and history. The narrative's language is usually simple and straightforward, like a traditional history book. Its short sentences and brief bits of dialogue contribute further to the illusion of reading history. Only at the last does García Márquez remind the reader that the book is a novel by placing the acknowledgments at the end. The reader, caught up in the account of Bolívar's last journey, is finally told that Bolívar's voyage down the river is one of the least documented moments in his life. Thus what the reader has been absorbing is a fictionalization of history, perhaps the only way that history can be retold and rewritten.

Mario Vargas Llosa

Vargas Llosa may be the most prolific of all the writers associated with the Latin American "boom." Since his first book, *Los jefes* (a collection of short stories translated into English as part of *The Cubs and Other Stories*), appeared in 1959, his literary production has flowed without ceasing in a cascade of short stories, novels, plays, essays, and literary criticism. Consequently, critical works seeking to present an overview of his work are problematic because they quickly become outdated by the sheer volume of Vargas Llosa's writing.⁸ His relationship with literature is well captured by the title of Raymond Williams's first chapter of *Mario Vargas Llosa*, "The History of a Passion."

Williams's study presents a readable and well-organized overview of Vargas Llosa and his literature up to 1984.⁹ Williams divides his subject's production into a series of chronological phases leading up to what he considers the culmination of Vargas Llosa's fiction writing: *La guerra del fin del mundo* (1981), published in English as *The War of the End of the World*. Williams asserts that the novel's "epic vision, apotheosis of storytelling,

8. Among the book-length studies on Vargas Llosa, see the excellent work of José Miguel Oviedo, *Mario Vargas Llosa: la invención de una realidad* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1970; 2d ed. 1977). See also Dick Gerdes, *Mario Vargas Llosa* (Boston, Mass.: Twayne, 1985).

9. Since that time, Vargas Llosa has published a play, *La Chunga* (1985), and three novels: *Quien mató a Palomino Molero* (1986), *El hablador* (1987), and *Elogio de la madrastra* (1988).

and fascinating characters are just three of the several factors that make *The War of the End of the World* a synthesis of Vargas Llosa's writing career" (p. 121).

The first stage includes the early stories and *La ciudad y los perros* (published in 1963), the novel that launched Vargas Llosa's international career. An immediate success, the work received the Spanish Premio de la Crítica and was translated into English by 1966 as *The Time of the Hero*. Vargas Llosa's first novel shows a writer who already had total command of the narrative techniques needed to maintain the reader's interest. But the novel's sharp criticism of the Peruvian military establishment led to a strong reaction against it in Perú. Vargas Llosa recounted this reaction in a *New York Times Magazine* article (20 Nov. 1983): "The book had a brilliant reception: one thousand copies were ceremoniously burned in the patio of the school and several generals attacked it bitterly. One of them said that the book was the work of a 'degenerate mind,' and another, who was more imaginative, claimed that I had undoubtedly been paid by Ecuador to undermine the prestige of the Peruvian army" (cited by Williams, p. 13). Since his first novel, Vargas Llosa's concern with Peruvian social and political reality has remained a constant in his work, being the main preoccupation of his next two novels, *La casa verde* (1965, *The Green House*), and *Conversación en la catedral* (1969, *Conversation in the Cathedral*).

Williams points out that *La casa verde* is "a denunciation of Peru's basic institutions. The denunciation is emphasized by the fact that in each prologue section an indigenous group or individual Indian is abused or victimized" (p. 56). While *La casa verde* deals with the problems of abuse and exploitation, *Conversación en la catedral* clearly attacks the dictatorial regime of General Manuel Odría in the 1950s. In another study of Vargas Llosa, Dick Gerdes summarized the political aspect of the book: "This novel shows how a Peruvian dictatorship in the 1950s not only determined but destroyed its citizens' lives."¹⁰

In the next stage of Vargas Llosa's literary career, he seemed to turn away from these social and political realities. Williams characterizes this phase as "the discovery of humor," which is manifested in two novels: *Pantaleón y las visitadoras* (*Captain Pantoja and the Special Service*) in 1973, and *La tía Julia y el escribidor* (*Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*) in 1977. The first deals with a character obsessed by perfection. The much more interesting *La tía Julia* is a complex mixture of fiction and autobiography.

The problems of autobiography in this text are discussed more fully in Rosemary Geisdorfer-Feal's *Novel Lives: The Fictional Autobiographies of Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Mario Vargas Llosa*. She demonstrates that Vargas Llosa has always believed that every novel is autobiographical

10. Gerdes, *Mario Vargas Llosa*, 93.

in many ways. *La tía Julia*, however, goes beyond anything Vargas Llosa had attempted previously along this line. The narrator of the novel, an aspiring young writer named "Marito" or "Varguitas," falls in love with and eventually marries his aunt Julia. The names and situation thus reflect directly Vargas Llosa's first marriage to his aunt, Julia Urquidi. She subsequently reacted sharply to the novel by providing her own account of the events.¹¹ Another writer in the story, eccentric scriptwriter Pedro Camacho, mesmerizes radio audiences in Lima with his soap operas. Young Marito admires Camacho's dedication and discipline in writing. Williams points out that these literary obsessions typify not only Camacho but Vargas Llosa. Hence the scriptwriter is another autobiographical figure in the narrative. An additional level of autobiography is analyzed by Geisdorfer-Feal in the relationship between Camacho's fictional life and the characters in the soap operas he writes. All these complex networks of names and relationships seem to obscure, rather than clarify, the question of whose autobiography is being related. Geisdorfer-Feal concludes: "Even though the factual data in the work correspond to events in the author's life, that fictive radio soap opera parodies alternate with the autobiographical chapters in *La tía Julia* casts a shadow of doubt over the authenticity of the text as a whole" (p. 162). In other words, the reader should not forget that *La tía Julia* is fiction.

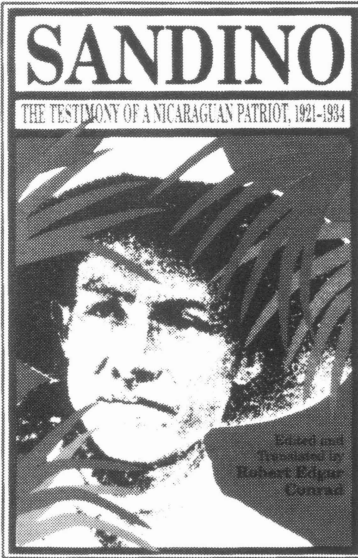
La guerra del fin del mundo (*The War of the End of the World*) represents a radical change in themes: Vargas Llosa's narrative is set outside Peru and deals with events from the past. The novel recounts a revolt by a group of religious fanatics in the Brazilian town of Canudos at the end of the nineteenth century and is based on Euclides da Cunha's 1902 nonfictional account, *Os Sertões* (*Rebellion in the Backlands*). Williams calls Vargas Llosa's account "a novel of synthesis" and the text "the culmination of his production as a story teller. This novel also represents a synthesis of other specific themes and techniques from his previous work" (p. 147).

Williams also analyzes Vargas Llosa's more recent works, which he believes restate some of the themes of earlier works. These topics range from political reality in Peru, the theme of *Historia de Mayta* (1984, published as *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta*), to incestuous and porno-erotic literature in *Elogio de la madrastra* (1988). But the uninterrupted chain of literary works that Vargas Llosa produces always contains surprises. Each new book appears to be yet another link in the development of a writer who seems determined to keep his readers guessing about his next move. The same could be said of García Márquez. When critics were convinced that he would not write another novel, he published the magnificent *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*. Thus looking back over the literary careers of

11. See Julia Urquidi Illanes, *Lo que Varguitas no dijo* (La Paz: Biblioteca Popular Boliviana de Última Hora, 1983).

these two writers is a fascinating adventure for the critic and the reader. Both Williams's studies of these authors provide excellent references as well as critical insights into their literary development. The essays edited by Julio Ortega and Rosemary Geisdorfer-Feal's monograph offer closer analyses of various aspects of their literary production. But however assiduous the critical studies, the reader must not forget that any current retrospective of the works of García Márquez and Vargas Llosa is doomed to be premature.

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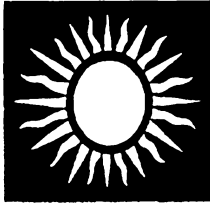
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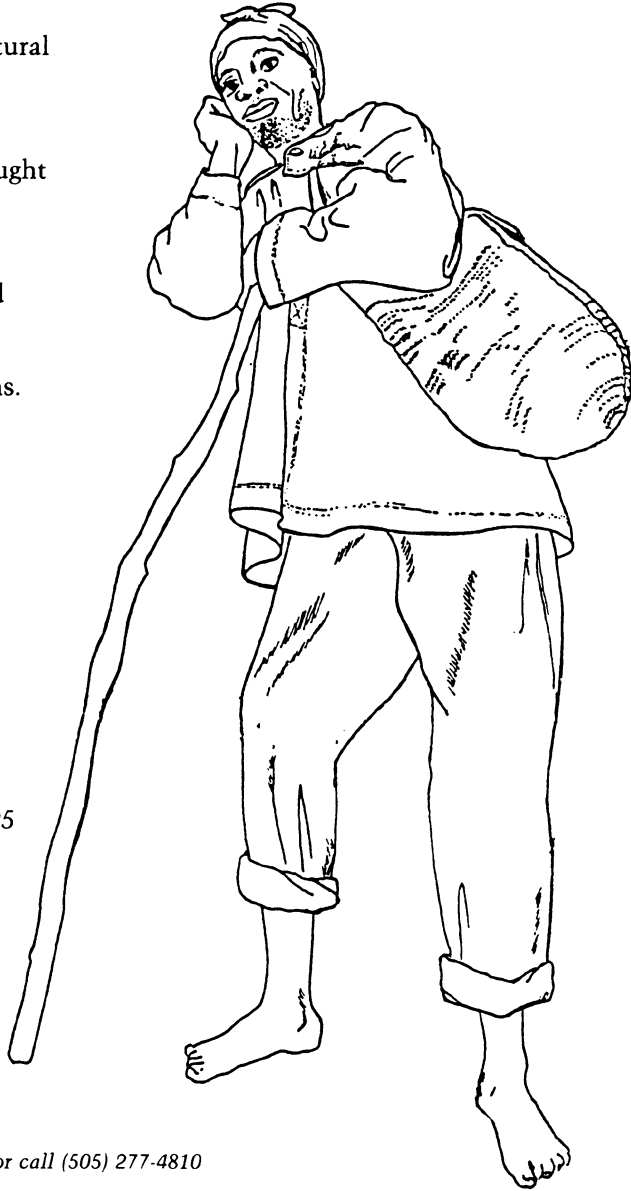
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