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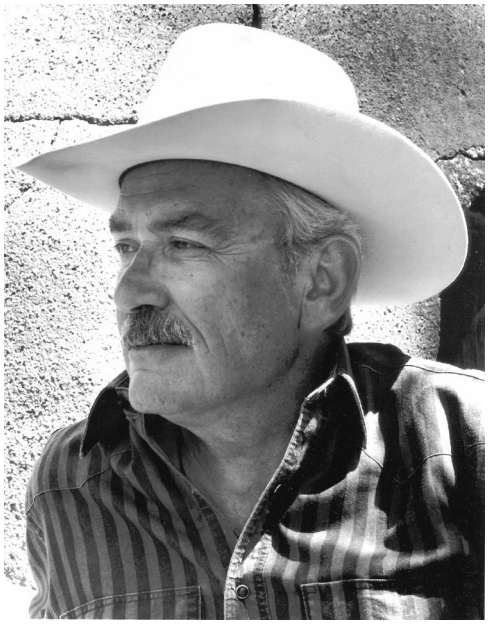

Keith Basso at the University of New Mexico, circa 1993. (Courtesy of UNM Anthropology Department)

Keith H. Basso (1940–2013)

Keith H. Basso, Distinguished Professor of Anthropology Emeritus at the University of New Mexico, died in Phoenix, Arizona, on August 4, 2013. Thanks to his theoretical adventurousness and vivid and prolific writing, not to mention his long-term fieldwork and commitment to Western Apaches, Basso's work was well and widely known across the fields of cultural and linguistic anthropology as well as in Apache, Southwest U.S., and Native American studies.

Born March 15, 1940, in Asheville, North Carolina, Keith grew up mostly in Connecticut, but his mother, Etolia Simmons, a teacher, and his father, Hamilton Basso, a novelist, essayist, and editor (notably at *The New Yorker*), had New Orleans roots. Like his parents, Keith enjoyed literature and writing from an early age. Some of that story is told in his own words in a critical study of his father's writings, Inez Hollander Lake's *The Road from Pompey's Head: The Life and Work of Hamilton Basso* (Lake 1999). The book details Hamilton Basso's position in the interwar Southern literary renaissance, and Lake's portrait gives a sense of the artistic and intellectual environment in which Keith grew up, with house visitors including such legends as William Faulkner.

Southwestern U.S. anthropology first came alive for Keith while taking Clyde Kluckhohn's anthropology classes at Harvard University, where he completed an undergraduate degree in 1962. While at Harvard, he spent the summer of 1959 in Arizona, and that is when his passion for horses, history, and the language and lives of White Mountain Apaches gave him a life's calling. After Harvard, Keith went on to Stanford University for graduate study in anthropology, receiving his Ph.D. in 1967.

Basso's teaching career began in 1967 at the University of Arizona. He moved to Yale University in 1982 and then, in 1988, to the University of New Mexico (UNM), where he served as Regents Professor and then Distinguished Professor of Anthropology. He remained at UNM until his retirement in 2006, teaching one semester each year and the rest of the time living and working on his small ranch in Heber, Arizona. This placed him close to the Western Apache community of Cibecue, the site of his ethnographic and linguistic research for 54 years and a place where he had many long friendships.

Basso's work on the Apache began with his Ph.D. dissertation, later published as *Western Apache Witchcraft* (1969). Additional books on Apache culture, language, and history quickly appeared around the same time: *The Gift of Changing Woman* (1966), *The Cibecue Apache* (1970), and two edited volumes, one with Morris Opler on Apachean culture history (Basso and Opler 1971) and another compiling Greenville Goodwin's *Western Apache Raiding and Warfare* (Basso et al. 1971). Historical and culture area themes are also represented in substantial summary essays for the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (Basso 1973) and the Southwest volume of the *Handbook of North American Indians* (Basso 1983).

In addition to ethnography and history, Keith was closely engaged with Apache language matters from an early point in his career. The best known of his early linguistic essays include "Semantic Aspects of Linguistic Acculturation" (1967), a piece that maps the extension of Apache body part terms to automobile anatomy, and his most formal linguistic componential analysis, "The Western Apache Classificatory Verb System" (1968). But for ethnographers and linguistic anthropologists more broadly, the distinctly more influential Basso article from this period is "'To Give Up on Words': Silence in Western Apache Culture" (1970). This piece made clear the significance of silence as a communicative act, and it fundamentally changed simplistic stereotypes about Native American speech practices.

This article was part and parcel of the broader intellectual movement sweeping linguistic anthropology

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then—the ethnography of speaking and communication. This movement theorized language practice as cultural performance, stimulating deeper points of convergence between ethnographic and linguistic research. Basso's piece heralded a considerably broader, more performative, and more dramaturgical, as well as cultural, understanding of language and discourse. It remains one of the most widely reprinted, taught, and discussed essays in the history of linguistic anthropology.

These three early classics, together with later 1970s and 1980s works of equal significance such as his well-known study of Apache writing system (Basso and Anderson 1973), are reprinted in a collection that summarizes the range of Keith's ethnolinguistic engagements with lexical semantics, discourse and performance, and narrative and storytelling, the book *Western Apache Language and Culture* (Basso 1992).

During the 1970s, Basso further honed the style he developed so articulately in his silence essay, simultaneously demonstrating the centrality of linguistic knowledge to deep ethnographic writing and the centrality of ethnography to deep understandings of language in practice and to the critique of formal linguistic theory. His masterful piece on "wise words" of the Western Apache (1976) was written for a School of American Research (SAR) Advanced Seminar that Keith organized with Henry Selby in 1974. The resultant book that they edited, *Meaning in Anthropology* (Basso and Selby 1976), was widely cited and widely taught. It can be fairly said that the book's essays were central to many conversations that helped shape debates in cultural and linguistic anthropological theory for years to come.

After the SAR seminar, Keith spent a year at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton and then further developed his relationship with New Mexico during a resident fellowship year at SAR in 1977–78. During that residency, he completed the project he started at Princeton, the book *Portraits of "The Whiteman": Linguistic Play and Cultural Symbols among the Western Apache* (1979). With poignant cartoon accompaniments by the Apache artist and humorist Vincent Craig, the book unpacks both the linguistic structure and the performance practices of Apache jokes about Anglos and, with them, a reverse anthropology of just how "whiteman" behaviors appear to Apache observers.

In the 1980s, Keith became involved in the study of Apache naming practices and the performance of storytelling about place names. His emergent theory imagined place discursively in and through verbal performance. First suggested in a piece on "Western Apache Placename Hierarchies" (1981), it was further developed in the more influential essays: "'Stalking with Stories'" (1984) and "'Speaking with Names'" (1988). In these latter two articles, Keith confronted the complexities of engaging indigenous environmental philosophies through the linguistic ethnography of place names and the expressive practices of their invocation. This time his work showed how a serious ethnographic study of lexical semantics extended even farther beyond cultural taxonomy or metaphor theory into ways that the speaking of place names both summarizes and prompts stories, theorizing narrative form together with a poetics of memory.

The convergence of linguistic, ethnographic, environmental, and philosophical issues in Basso's late 1980s essays led to a proposal for another SAR Advanced Seminar, convened with Steven Feld in 1993 and published as *Senses of Place* (Feld and Basso 1996). Keith's contribution to the seminar and book was the early version of his essay "Wisdom Sits in Places" (1996a). That year also saw publication of the longer version of this piece in Keith's magnum opus, *"Wisdom Sits in Places": Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (1996b). Instantly recognized as a work of great originality, the book received the Western States Book Award for Creative Nonfiction in 1996, the Victor Turner Prize for Ethnographic Writing in 1997, and then the SAR J. I. Staley Prize in 2001.

With humility, subtlety, and vivid writing, *"Wisdom Sits in Places"* made a major contribution to the understanding of senses of place in human history and in the modern world. A demonstration of the best kind of integration of contemporary linguistic and cultural anthropology, Basso's four essays on the construction and enactment of place show how language—from the level of words in the form of place names to the level of discourse in performed narrative and dialogue—is central to the ways in which Western Apache imagine and implement their world. Avoiding direct polemic, Keith lets Apache place names, "like tiny imagist poems" in his memorable phrase, make their eloquent case for the moral authority and agency of a community, its members, and their heritage. In doing so, he created a work that speaks powerfully to indigenous communities as well as to anthropologists, linguists, environmentalists, lawyers, historians, archeologists, and others concerned with land rights, cultural equity and repatriation, and that shows the resilience of the past in shaping the social realities of the Apache present.

Coming full circle, back to Apache community and cultural history but this time through storytelling and first-person narrative, Keith's last major project was assisting Western Apache elder Eva Tulene Watt by recording, editing, and annotating her life history, *Don't Let the Sun Step Over You: A White Mountain Apache Family Life, 1860–1975* (Watt with Basso 2004). This was a deeply satisfying project for Keith, both because of the stunning and revelatory content and power of the narrative and because of how it spoke to his abiding interest in presenting the intelligence, wit, wisdom, and authority of Apache voices and Apache ways of knowing.

During his years at UNM, Basso became more deeply, but always quietly, involved in the larger world of Native American affairs and particularly Western Apache advocacy (see Deloria and Basso 1991). From 1992 to 1995, he was on the board of the National Museum of the American Indian. From the early 1990s, Keith worked tirelessly with the Western Apaches to articulate NAGPRA claims for repatriation requests to several museums. He also worked

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as a tribal consultant and as an expert witness on several Western Apache land rights and religious freedom cases. At the confluence of these concerns, he was involved in helping to research and articulate the substantial historical background to Apache contestation over the building of an observatory on Mt. Graham, known locally as Dzil Nchaa Si An. As with his scholarship, Keith treated these very time-consuming and often quite fraught activities as serious responsibilities to his interlocutors and by now longtime friends and neighbors. And like his scholarship, he tended to just do and enjoy the work, steadfastly avoiding any limelight. This was all in keeping with Keith's modest demeanor and his self-effacing sense of humor.

Keith often said that once he came back to the Southwest to teach at UNM, his greatest pleasure was simply life with his wife Gayle Potter-Basso at the Halter Cross Ranch, where they could live and work near to many longstanding Western Apache friends and colleagues. Keith loved the cowboy life, tending to horses, mules, fields, and fences with the same rigor and style with which he could craft a memorable sentence. For some 20 years, he especially enjoyed braiding rawhide horse gear and, indeed, became an artist of the trade whose work was collectible. But Keith never touted his own accomplishments, and he would even express discomfort over the mildly promotional efforts by his friends. I once asked him for a CV to check some details for his UNM Distinguished Professor nomination letter. Days passed. Finally he obliged. On the top of it he wrote: "(Thanks, Steve. I suspect you have better things to do.)"

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