

**CAROBETH LAIRD:
THE WOMAN, THE MYTH, THE LEGEND**

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In the early 1900s, Carobeth Laird accompanied linguist/ethnologist John Peabody Harrington for seven storied years, gathering significant information about the languages and cultures of indigenous groups of California. Although Laird is often overshadowed by the mystique of Harrington, she was an incredibly courageous and innovative ethnographer in her own right. Her body of work is an important contribution to American ethnology. Forming strong relationships with many of her indigenous informants, she recorded stories that led to important developments in American anthropology and which continue to inform California archaeology to this day.

“. . . myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation” (Campbell 1949:3).

THE WOMAN

Carobeth Laird (1895-1983), formerly Carobeth Tucker Harrington (Figure 1), was an anthropologist, linguist, and storyteller who is perhaps most remembered for her book *Encounter with an Angry God* (1975), the deeply personal account of her relationship with her first husband, John Peabody Harrington (1884-1961). Trained in anthropology and linguistics at Stanford, Berkeley, and Germany, Harrington is famous for his exhaustive early 20th century ethnographic recordings of indigenous people in California and the Southwest. Laird’s letters and manuscripts from her seven years of partnership with and marriage to Harrington (1915-1922) provide important insights into the lives and cultures of southern California Indians at a pivotal time in California anthropology. Towards the end of her life, Laird produced a number of her own scholarly works about Chemehuevi culture (Bean 1985:3). Some of her more significant publications, *The Chemehuevis* (1976) and *Mirror and Pattern: George Laird’s World of Chemehuevi Mythology* (1984), were inspired by her time with her second husband, George Laird (1871-1940), whom she met on the Colorado River Indian Reservation in 1919.

In the beginning of *Encounter with an Angry God*, Laird recounts how in the summer of 1915, she—a 19-year-old young woman from Texas with no formal education—fell in love with her “young and beautiful” linguistics teacher at San Diego Normal School. She thought he looked like an “angry god” (Laird 1975:2). Hereafter, Harrington is in many ways the focal point of the story. However, as the account unfolds, one sees that her persistence and growing will to carve out her own identity as a self-determined woman and anthropologist becomes the more compelling narrative than the one about the angry god himself. The stories and anthropological information that Laird recorded and the manner in which she recorded them has left an important legacy that continues to enrich contemporary archaeological work.

Throughout most of *Encounter with an Angry God*, Laird describes her unwavering devotion and loyalty to both her husband and his often-outlandish ethnographic pursuits. Of Harrington’s dedication to recording informant testimony, she said, “The vessel of the old culture was broken and the precious contents were flowing away and evaporating before our very eyes. Harrington lapped like a man dying of thirst at every random trickle” (Laird 1975:112). Harrington’s obsession with collecting information often compromised their personal relationship and it was her “force of will” that held them together through the worst of times (Laird 1975:21).

One of these moments occurred around January 1917. Harrington left her eight months pregnant, without food and sleeping on a dirt floor in a one-room adobe in Tejon Ranch, so that he could attend a



Figure 1. Carobeth Laird (formerly Carobeth Tucker Harrington), ca. 1915. J. P. Harrington Papers, courtesy of the Department of Anthropology, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History.

meeting with his fellow anthropology colleagues at Berkeley (Laird 1975:33). For two weeks, while his pregnant wife was barely surviving on flour gruel, bacon rind, and cabbage from a sympathetic informant, Harrington was enthusiastically and carefully procuring special metal boxes to protect his “precious” ethnographic notes (or “slips”) (Laird 1975:35). Harrington would go on to compile thousands of these slips of field notes “which were to eventually fill over 400 large boxes and provide significant data on virtually every [indigenous] linguistic group in North America” (Blackburn 1975:5). When we reminisce about how important the survival of these ethnographic notes is for today’s archaeological work, it is good to remember that Carobeth Laird not only helped record the information, but also in a way, she bore the burden of protecting such information.

Celebrated for his meticulous field work but known to be eccentric, Harrington paradoxically was an expert in his field but had difficulty functioning in society (see Snead 2016). His insecure and competitive nature underpinned his extreme behavior. Laird reveals that Harrington was often so competitive with his contemporaries in the field, such as Edward Sapir, that he would lie to them about his undertakings. Harrington also competed with his Berkeley counterpart, Alfred Kroeber, believing that his linguistic work lacked thoroughness. Envious of his status and regularity of publishing, “Kroeber loomed over [Harrington’s] life like a menacing giant” (Laird 1975:32).

Harrington also loomed large over Carobeth Laird’s life. However, even in the early days, Laird occasionally resisted Harrington’s unstable treatment of her. During a blow-out fight with Harrington at Santa Ynez about their unnecessarily sordid living conditions, she struck him (Laird 1975:20). And when he chose to socialize with strangers in Bakersfield for hours rather than return to their infant desperately waiting to be fed, Carobeth lamented, “In my bitterness, I felt the premonition that I would never again be able to nurse this child or any other I might have. But along with the bitterness, I could feel a hard core of resistance growing within me. It had been a minute crystal when I struck him that first summer at Santa Ynez; it had grown enough to give me strength to refuse to give birth on a dirt floor; and it would grow (though this I was still far from admitting) till it became a wall of stone separating us forever” (Laird 1975:39-40).

Despite Carobeth Laird’s trials with Harrington, the language used in her cornucopia of letters to him while he was working in Washington D.C. in 1917 suggest that for a while, she maintained her repose and was unflinchingly committed to him as his wife and ethnographic research partner. Her letters are flowered with romantic hyperbole to him such as “My dear sweet one” (October 31, 1917), “My dear sweet lover” (November 6, 1917), and “Goodnight, dear god who giveth joy to my youth [this is an allusion to a line in a traditional Catholic mass], Your girlie, Carobeth” (1917). She later reflected, “For at least a year and a half of that time [during their work-marriage partnership], our personal relationship had been steadily deteriorating, although I was still trying to pretend to myself that I was satisfied with my life and devoted to my husband” (Laird 1984:7). She said, “everything personal about Harrington was becoming increasingly distasteful to [her] and the pleasantries in her “epistles” to him became “fossilized expressions of affection” (Laird 1975: 127). Eventually, after being marooned by Harrington to record ethnographic stories and informant testimony at the Chemehuevi reservation in Parker, Arizona, she gathered the strength to repudiate Harrington’s patriarchal control over her, casting off the angry god once and for all. They were divorced in 1922.

Although originally collaborative partners in ethnology and linguistics (Laird 1984:7), Harrington and Laird seemed to have very different approaches. While some remember Harrington for being “willing to go to any lengths to obtain more data” (Lawton 1975:xxi), Laird recognized early on “that the people who spoke or had spoken these languages had also existed as human beings. Had lived and loved and felt” (Laird 1975: 59). Copying early baptismal records of San Gabriel Mission in 1916, she said she “began to realize something that [she] had scarcely thought before: the suffering involved when a technologically superior culture, bent on conquest, impinges on native cultures which have been evolving at their own rate for millennia.” This is in sharp contrast to Harrington, who according to Laird, had indignation “for the cultures and languages which had been wiped out” (Laird 1975:90). Although Harrington had success recording thousands of pages of notes about their indigenous informants, Laird’s sense of empathy seemed to have resulted in deeper bonds with native peoples, especially those who had stories to tell.

THE MYTH

Carobeth Laird is often remembered for her recordings of Chemehuevi stories (also sometimes referred to as mythologies), but Laird’s affinity for Native American stories seemed to have taken root during her visits to Chumash, Tongva, and Tataviam homelands in and around Santa Barbara, the Santa Monica Mountains, and the San Fernando Valley. In a letter to Harrington dated October 27, 1917, she expressed her enthusiasm for comparative mythology, stating, “I read through the B. [Barbareno] myths (you certainly have some fine ones) and made a partial list of some of the most striking points as compared with the Yokuts.” In another

letter over a week later, she said, “I wish I could stay with Melendrez [*sic*] so that I could talk with them evenings, getting myths, etc. But as they both so old it will probably be best to try to stay at Owensmouth [Canoga Park] and go over there every day” (Laird 1917). (Laird and Harrington called Juan and Juana Menéndez “Melendrez” in their notes and letters.)

Juana and Juan Menéndez were senior members of the Chumash/Tongva community in the west San Fernando Valley at the time (Knight 2017) and, therefore, some of Harrington and Laird’s primary informants in the region. Juana Valenzuela Menéndez (1862-1928) was born at San Gabriel Mission and spoke Gabrielino (Tongva) (Harrington 1986:R106 F81, 111). Juan Antonio Manuel Menéndez (1857-1924) was the grandson of Odón Chihuya (also known as José Odon), who in 1845 was the principal grantee of a section of land in west San Fernando Valley later consolidated by Miguel Leonis into the Rancho El Escorpión (Babilis 2016:3; Johnson 2006:29; Knight 2017a:16; McCawley 1996:16). Odon was born at the principal Chumash village in Malibu (*Humaliwo*). His daughter (Juan’s mother), Maria del Espíritu Santo (also known as Espíritu Chihuya de Leonis), spoke Fernandeno (a dialect of Tongva) and a *Humaliwo* dialect of Chumash (Gandy 2016:21).

Sometime in the late 1850s, Juan Menéndez’s mother Espíritu was wed through a common-law marriage to the Basque sheepherder and litigious businessperson Miguel Leonis. Through legal battles and deception, Leonis acquired her father Odon’s land in order to secure legal possession of the entire Rancho El Escorpión grant in 1871. Around the same time, Miguel Leonis and Espíritu, their daughter Marcelina, and Espíritu’s son Juan Menéndez (by her previous relationship) established residence at what is known today as the Leonis Adobe in Calabasas (Babilis 2016:3). When Espíritu died in 1906, Juan and Juana Menéndez probably became the primary leaders of the Native American descendant community in the west San Fernando Valley area (Knight 2017b:15).

In 1917, Laird and Harrington visited “this greatly respected couple who lived in a narrow little two-storied adobe house at Calabasas [Leonis Adobe]” several times (Laird 1975:91). There and on walks with the couple throughout parts of west San Fernando Valley, they recorded important information about Native American places “of first class importance and interest” (Harrington 1986:R106:152:4:21; R106-188:1:1). Laird made return visits to the Menéndez residence without Harrington later that year. Reminiscing about her time with Juan and Juana Menéndez over 50 years prior, Laird could not remember their actual names and instead referred to them as the esteemed “Don Juan” and Doña Marta (Laird 1975, 1982).

Although Carobeth Laird said that all of “[her] visits to the house at Calabasas were enriching experiences” (at one point she even described packing into her early-model Ford with the Menéndez family and driving up high into the mountains through difficult terrain to visit their friends the Trujillos in Topanga Canyon), she could not “recall what precisely was the line of enquiry that made them [the Menéndez family] so important . . .” (Laird 1975:97). By the time Carobeth wrote *Encounter with an Angry God* in her elderly years, she clearly had forgotten the connection between the Menéndez family and important local indigenous stories.

It was not until 1982 that researcher Bob Edberg helped her recall the purpose of her visits to their home (Laird 1982). Edberg inspired her to remember that she had gone there to document the Khra'wijiwi' story (or “myth”), a significant three-part story about death, sorrow, and motherhood, set in actual locations within the local landscape. In her reply letter to Edberg, she said, “it is gratifying to find out who the couple at Las Calabasas really were. I remember so much about them and have forgotten so much. . . . You are correct, I was the one who recorded the myth. Reading it, I recall vividly the dramatic way in which Don Juan told it” (Laird 1982).

The “myth” that Laird documented from Don Juan and Juana on the evening of November 9, 1917 (Johnson 2006:46), the Khra'wijiwi' story, is not a myth in the way we often use the word to mean a falsehood. Rather, it is a story of metaphysical significance, or as famous comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell defined them, “Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life” and “Every myth is psychologically symbolic. Its narratives and images are to be read, therefore, not literally, but as metaphors” (Campbell 1988).

According to Leslie Schupp, who analyzed the story in 1983, it contains both Chumash and Tongva elements. Laird’s recording of the myth is in greater detail than the recording of it by Hugo Reid (1852), who

learned it from his Tongva wife. Laird recognized similarities between Reid's version of the myth and Chemehuevi myths (Laird, letter to Edberg et al. 1983; Schupp 1983:1). In the Fernandeano Reel (#106) of the "Harrington Papers," Laird noted that Juan Menéndez's mother Espíritu told the Khra'wijawi' story and other stories better than he could and indicated that parts of the Khra'wijawi' story were sung (Laird in Harrington 1986:106-188:1:6-7). Still, Juan was able to share the full arc of the important story with her, which includes real landmarks in the mountains of the San Fernando Valley and surrounding areas.

Many of the story's themes are universal (Schupp 1983:3). One part of the story relates how Khra'wijawi's daughter gets swallowed up by the water spirits, demonstrating the sacrifice of a mother for a child, but also punishment for her selfish actions earlier in the story:

Crying, the girl fled to the cave where she gathered up her hair, the basket where she had hidden, a carrying net, and marched away. She arrived at a spring [also referred to as Aguaga de los Guares/El Zapo in Harrington (1986:106-191:2:88) (CA-Lan-4817 in Hidden Hills)] where women fill their water jars. Seated at the edge of the water was a baby who looked just like her baby. "Oh, how did you get here!" She cried and picked it up and held it close to nurse. That baby sucked and sucked and sucked until it swallowed her completely.

People know what happened because they found the hair, the basket, and the net. It wasn't her baby. It was the underwater monster who takes any form. Some people call it Mother of the Water.

In her analysis, Schupp (1983:5) claimed that "when the daughter of Khra'wijawi' leaves behind her hair, a net, and a jar, she appears to be equipping her soul for travelling to the land of the dead." Apparently, providing protection for the soul's journey, these objects seemed to have been important religious symbols in San Fernando Valley and possibly other parts of southern California.

A copper jar burial arrangement found by Paul Schumacher on Santa Catalina Island (*Pimu*) in 1877, curated at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, contains the same elements as those described in the Khra'wijawi' story (Ringelstein 2016:136-137). The elements within the copper jar (net, basket, and hair) and the jar itself with its association with water, are consistent with the symbols related to the baby and its mother. The inclusion and arrangement of these symbolic items suggest that there might be a reification of the defining elements of the Khra'wijawi' story within the burial, perhaps demonstrating a correspondence between the values espoused in the myth and actual cultural practice.

Given the power of its symbols and its local importance, Laird's recordation of the Khra'wijawi' story provides important and enduring links with archaeology. Telling these stories to multiple generations may have helped to map the world that Chumash, Tongva, and Tataviam people lived in, not just in terms of important places mentioned in the story and physically on the landscape, but also through the way the story may have reinforced certain ethics, values, and rituals. Khra'wijawi' journeyed through many different places within the Chumash, Tongva, and Tataviam homelands (Knight 2018), revealing a well-connected mythical-ritual landscape of villages and sacred locales. Given *Pimu's* importance as a place closer to the Land of the Dead than the mainland, it would have been appropriate to include *Pimu* within this network of important places (Ringelstein 2016:140-141).

THE LEGEND

Through her time spent with the Menéndez family and her detailed recording of the Khra'wijawi' story, as well as other stories such as "Kestrel was the Chief of the Village where Coyote Lived" (Harrington 1986: R106), Carobeth Laird has preserved important links to the symbolic, metaphysical dimensions of indigenous groups in southern California. Her legacy endures through the people she continues to enlighten intergenerationally with her ethnographies. In her remarkable book, *Mirror and Pattern*, which was published two years

after her death, she said, “The fragments of ancient lore which [George Laird] taught me were destined to be preserved, destined eventually to be made available to those who truly care about such knowledge” (Laird 1984:8). Her recordings continue to provide avenues for cultural renewal and revitalization.

In reflection, Laird’s own life could be viewed as a “monomyth” (Campbell 1949). In Campbell’s classic study of the hero’s journey, the hero [or heroine in this case] must overcome major obstacles, sometimes even defeating “tyrant monsters” (Campbell 1949:11) in order to come “back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (Campbell 1949:30). Part of defeating the “monster” for Laird was recognizing her own inner flaws. She admitted later, “For my part, I had a naive worship of scientists, particularly those engaged in the study of ‘primitive man’ . . .” (Laird 1984:7). When Laird finally realized that the angry god “was just a dirty little boy having a tantrum” (Laird 1975:115), the gates of eternity began to open for her, and she began to come into accord with her authentic self (although, to be fair to Harrington, he was also young and flawed when they married and was on his own path of self-realization).

In 1919, Laird had a revelation she described as “that moment of alchemic transformation, that ‘meeting of the eyes’ which committed [her] to another man for life—and for eternity” (Laird 1975:115). That other man was “one of the ancient, sacred ones,” Chemehuevi George Laird (1871-1940) (Laird 1984:9). George Laird was the grandson of the legendary Chemehuevi Chief, Black Turtle (*Ayarupagarimi*), who he visited frequently (Laird 1984:2). He was also of mixed backgrounds, about 1/3 Scottish and 1/8 Cherokee. But Carobeth Laird said, “In no respect was George Laird more Indian than in his attitude towards animals. To him they were people—a different sort of people, belonging to different tribes, so to speak, but always people, never things. When he spoke English he followed the Chemehuevi usage of never referring to an animal as it. From the first this attitude attracted me, for it approximated my own instinctive attitude—something which all those whom I had known before regarded as silly” (Laird 1984:5).

Laird’s success as an anthropologist and author were largely inspired by her two marriages to two distinctly different men, but never would have materialized had she not learned how to find her own true voice. She was known to have had a “powerful intellect” that guided her work, balanced with “an extraordinary charm, a loving and sensual personality, and a kindness that was expressed even in her angriest moments” (Bean 1985:3). In her posthumous publication, she explained with sage forthrightness, “Harrington had a genuine respect for my ability to hear and record Native American languages . . . In fairness, I must admit that he cared for me as much as he would allow himself to care for anyone” (Laird 1984:7). In the analysis of her life’s adventure, apotheosis, and return, we see that she not only encountered the Angry Gods, she also made peace with them.

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