

Ethnography

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Ethnography and the book that was lost

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ABSTRACT ■ This article is a meditation on the way ethnography, as a method and form of expression, has informed a range of reflexive anthropological journeys in Spain, Mexico, and Cuba. It uses a poetic sense of reflexivity to explore the embedded nature of personal experience within the ethnographic process. Borrowing the metaphor of 'the lost book' from a fictional story by Agnon, the article explores the contradictory dynamic that emerges in witnessing loss and simultaneously wanting to preserve culture. Ultimately, the article urges ethnographers to pay attention to intuition, serendipity, and unexpected moments of epiphany in the quest for ethnographic ways of knowing, while encouraging ethnographers to present their findings in a wider variety of literary and artistic genres.

KEY WORDS ■ story-telling, witnessing, loss, love, gift, identity, diaspora, reflexive ethnography, ethnographic filmmaking, Sephardic Jews, Cuba

A book that was lost

Ethnography began as a method, which was discovered, perfected, and institutionalized in western centers of power, for telling stories about the marginalized populations of the world. It has its origins in the flagrant colonial inequalities from which modernity was born and in the arrogant assumptions that its privileged intellectual class made about who has the right to

tell stories about whom. Knowing this history, how can ethnography still be practised today in an age of unprecedented global interconnectedness, in which continuing inequalities have only served to heighten awareness of the politics of all storytelling? What can be salvaged from the original vision of ethnography to make it a project of emancipation? Must every use of ethnography in the present inevitably be an act of apology and grief for the shamefulness of what ethnography was in the past? Is there still some lingering shame even in today's self-conscious pursuit of ethnography?

These are issues that have been hotly debated in recent years (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Sanjek, 1990; Fox, 1991; Harrison, 1991; Behar and Gordon, 1995). Contrary to expectations that ethnography would become an anachronism, it has, in fact, proliferated as a method, an epistemology, a field practice, and a form of writing and performance across the social sciences and humanities (Clifford, 1988; Geertz, 1989; Ellis and Bochner, 1996; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). There is a strange hunger for ethnography in the contemporary world, which is shaped by concepts of the 'really real' and the desire for stories based on the truth and immediacy of witnessing. Ethnography, rather than becoming extinct, has become a necessary way of knowing. Even though the pioneering writers of ethnography themselves often treated it as a 'second-fiddle' genre, current practitioners have come to cherish it (Behar, 1999). And yet to engage with this method is to be conscious of the contradictions of such knowing and the history of shame that precedes and marks all of our efforts to still want to be there ethnographically.

I came to ethnography because I wanted to be a storyteller who told stories about real people in real places. I was seduced by the notion of fieldwork, the idea of going some place to find a story I wasn't looking for. Of course, ethnographic journeys are always taken with the knowledge that the 'field' has already been theorized by precursors of various sorts (Limón, 1994). But the beauty and mystery of the ethnographer's quest is to find the unexpected stories, the stories that challenge our theories. Isn't that the reason why we still go to the field – even as we question where the field is located – in the 21st century? We go to find the stories we didn't know we were looking for in the first place.

I have great faith in the things I learn when I seem to be relinquishing my will. Often, in the pursuit of ethnography, you need to relinquish your will. I remember learning as a graduate student in anthropology that if the Nuer only want to talk about cows, then the ethnographer has to pay attention to cows. The stories I have told as an ethnographer were not stories I chose but stories that insinuated themselves into my consciousness because I had to be present in a different reality, I couldn't just make it up. I wrote about land tenure in Spain not because I found land tenure fascinating but because that was what people in the small village where I lived spoke about day in

and day out. I wrote about a street peddler in Mexico not because I had a special interest in street peddling but because Esperanza the street peddler could tell her life story to me better than any other woman I met during my three years of fieldwork. I told stories I didn't think were in me to tell. I told stories I thought had nothing to do with me and yet they managed to teach me something about myself that I needed to know. I wrote books that carried my name about stories I didn't know were mine to tell until after I told them.

This idea, that ethnography is about finding stories we don't know we have lost, became clear to me after I accidentally came across a gem of a short story while I was roaming through the literature section at *Border's* bookstore. Reading it brought me to tears. The story, which is exceedingly concise, is called 'A Book That Was Lost'. It was written by S.Y. Agnon, a Polish Jewish writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966 for his fictional writing in Hebrew. The title alone is enough to awaken curiosity, and even, I would say, the most morbid fear, in all who, in one way or another, have come to ethnography through a love of books and the desire to write our own books.

At the beginning of the story we learn about Rabbi Shmaria, who lives in a small town in Poland and has spent 12 years preparing a detailed commentary on another commentary written by a rabbi of an earlier generation on the laws concerning daily ritual. Convinced that he has 'left no difficult passage uninterpreted', he calls in the bookbinder to print and publish his book. But while the bookbinder is attending to Rabbi Shmaria's pages, the rabbi notices that the bookbinder happens to have brought along another manuscript for binding and he asks to see it. That manuscript, written by a scholar and rabbi more prominent than he, impresses Rabbi Shmaria so profoundly that he sighs and says, 'I have been preceded by another; there is no need for my work.' He sends the bookbinder home and leaves his work 'where it was . . . neither bound nor published'. Several generations later, the manuscript is found by a student poking around in the attic of the town's synagogue, where the worn-out religious books are kept before being taken to the graveyard for burial, as is customary in Jewish tradition. The student immediately sees that Rabbi Shmaria's text has 'nice distinctions' and 'innovations'. He is further persuaded of its value after he shows the text to his father, a teacher, and to other scholars, all of whom agree that the rabbi's voice deserves to be heard.

Pondering how best to prevent the text from falling into oblivion, the student decides to send it to Jerusalem, where a Jewish national library is being created to house the scattered texts of the Jewish diaspora. (This is in the 1920s, before the existence of the state of Israel.) The student saves his lunch money for many months, going hungry in order to send the book by mail from Poland to Jerusalem. Some time later, he ends up settling in

Jerusalem, arriving on the Ninth of Av, the day of mourning the destruction of the Temple. After the Ninth of Av, his friends show him around Jerusalem and they take him to the great library where he has sent Rabbi Shmaria's manuscript. The librarian shows them various books, and about each he says, 'It's the only one in the world, unique, a gift from so-and-so.' Finally, the rescuer of Rabbi Shmaria's manuscript tells the librarian about the book he sent from Poland. The librarian searches and searches to no avail, but he promises to keep looking. Over the years the book's rescuer keeps returning to the library and every time the librarian expresses the sincere hope that the book will be found. The years continue to pass. Eventually both the librarian and the one who succeeds him pass away, and still the book isn't found. The story ends with the simple but devastating admission, 'What a pity the book was lost' (Agnon, 1995).

The poignant politics of love and rescue

I imagine every person who hears this story brings their own story of loss and fear of loss to their reading. I will try to elucidate some of the meanings, specific and general, that this story called up in me in terms of both my personal history and my aims as a storyteller and ethnographer. I believe the story is haunting because it is about the horror of self-erasure. In reading the story I identified fully with Rabbi Shmaria because I have often felt the terrible uselessness of my own writing. I approach ethnography as a form of blurred-genre writing that mixes reportage with memoir, travel writing, theoretical reflection, accounts of dramatic encounters, the storytelling techniques of fiction, and sometimes even the lyricism of poetry. Since, for me, ethnography is most of all a method for converting lived experience into memorable, even beautiful, writing, I frequently wonder whether it might not be best to leave the writing to the 'professional writers', to those who truly know the craft of writing, like journalists, fiction writers, playwrights, and poets. Are all my labors in vain? Does it matter if I write or not? Will my writing always be just a poor second-fiddle rendition? Or are there 'innovations' I can offer as an ethnographer that make my efforts worthwhile?

In many ways, ethnographers are similar to the rabbinical scholars portrayed in Agnon's story. We write commentaries about the commentaries that our informants share with us about their lives and their societies. Most crucially, we listen to other people's stories, especially to the stories of those whose voices often go unheard. We believe that by listening to these stories and then retelling them, displacing these stories to other places and audiences, we can help to save the world. I know that it was with that faith that I went into cultural anthropology as a young woman 20 years ago.

But the fact is we cannot know the true value of our work in our own

lifetime. It is the future generations, those who will come after us, whose task it will be to decide whether our work is worth keeping. It is well known that what tends to become outdated first is the theory in ethnographies. As paradigms shift, an ethnography that once was a cutting edge demonstration of the merits of a theory of structural-functionalism, or a theory of social drama, or a theory of *communitas*, quickly loses its punch. What remains valuable in ethnographies after their theories become stale is precisely those aspects of lived experience that the ethnographer's theory could not harness, could not squeeze into the box. Long after the theoretical platforms of ethnographies have been superseded, what still makes them interesting as texts are the chronicles they offer of a society observed in a given historical moment; and the fictions they often unwittingly embrace, the fiction of who the ethnographer thought she/he was in the field, the fiction of how that society was constructed by the ethnographer, whether harmoniously or conflictively, depending on the nuances of the ethnographer's sensibility and the historical moment in which the ethnographer happened to be present as an observer.

It is exactly such an extended temporal and historical arc that gives Agnon's story its bite. The story doesn't stop at Rabbi Shmaria's loss of faith in the worthiness of his intellectual journey. It follows the thread of the story a few generations later and inserts it into a longer history. In this way, the story reaches down into a deeper level of sorrow and bereavement. Although the book was lost in its historical moment, it was almost saved in a subsequent moment. The irony is that it is precisely the heroic effort to save this old European Jewish book and give it a new home in the library in Jerusalem which leads to its more permanent loss. Not only is the book doubly lost, but it is denied proper burial in the Jewish cemetery in Poland, where it might have been given holy rest among other sacred religious books and objects. The book is condemned to be in transit forever, to remain in limbo, never to arrive at its destination in the promised land. Agnon's story asserts that sometimes knowledge can be lost, that even the worthiest of books can vanish without leaving a trace, as if they never existed. And yet, of course, what is important is that the story itself constructs a home for the lost book. The story creates a site to mark the absence of the lost book and in that way preserves a memory of it. Just as the Temple was lost, the book is lost. They are irretrievable. But marking the loss of the book in a story – or in the case of the Temple, in the constant reference to it in Hebrew liturgy – is a way of resisting its loss.

Nevertheless, the story cannot bring back the lost book. Agnon's take on modernity, like Walter Benjamin's, is suffused with an ambivalent awareness that to cross into modernity is to live in a world of translations without originals. A closer Jewish reading of this story adds another troubling level of meaning. Jerusalem is revealed as an incomplete and flawed repository of

Jewish learning and history. Much is lost in the transition from a diasporic Jewish existence to a centralized modern Zionist homeland. The Jewish past reaches the Jewish future only in fragments. If we add to our reading, as we can't help but do in the current historical nexus, our knowledge of the embattled situation in Jerusalem, and in Israel and Palestine right now, the story is prophetic. It seems to be an infinitely sad warning that even the most far-reaching of Jewish efforts not to lose the promised land, the land that, indeed, was promised to the Jews for centuries by the Torah, the quintessential 'Jewish Book', could result in yet more destruction and loss.

Loss has been a classical trope of ethnography. The practice of ethnography originates in the desire to salvage the fragments of societies that were seen as being on the verge of extinction. Ethnography engaged in a language of loss, of preventing loss, of mourning loss, of arriving there just in time to save the old books of culture from a total and permanent loss. Bringing the lost books to 'civilization', to the central library of western culture for preservation, ethnographers have classically tried to stem the tide of social transformation in which they themselves have been implicated. Ironically, like the savior of the lost book in Agnon's story, they have engaged in the act of bringing about further loss, being complicit with loss, enacting what has been called 'imperialist nostalgia' (Rosaldo, 1993).

In my effort to understand why Agnon's story brought me to tears, I realized that it touched me deeply because it spoke to me both personally and as an ethnographer. I was born a Jew in Cuba and consider myself a daughter of two homelands, Cuba and Israel, which I lost as a child. My four Jewish grandparents left Poland and Turkey in the 1920s, escaping growing anti-Semitism, and settled in Cuba, where they thought they had found their promised land in the tropics. Instead, diaspora followed upon diaspora, loss upon loss. In the next generation, not only my grandparents but my Cuban-born parents felt their economic livelihood was threatened by the revolution, and they decided to leave Cuba. We left Cuba in 1961. My parents didn't have passports since they had never traveled outside of Cuba and the US Embassy had shut down, but as Jews we were permitted by the Cuban government to be 'repatriated' in Israel. We went to live on a kibbutz that one of my mother's uncles, the only socialist in the family, had helped to found. But after a year, my parents chose to uproot again and go to New York.

I grew up in the United States, where I was always having to explain who I was as a Cuban Jew. So my understanding of loss will always be associated with the names of two countries, Cuba and Israel, and the child I cannot remember being in these two abandoned homelands. That child is a lost book. I know I was that person. I have seen the pictures. Family members and family friends who knew me then tell me who I was as a child in Cuba. But I have never been able to find that child again. I only remember from

the time our ship docked in New York. Everything before then is gone from my memory.

By becoming an ethnographer I acquired an intellectual and philosophical framework for my explorations of identity, memory, home, and the crossing of borders. The dislocations and relocations that are at the heart of the ethnographic imagination, and that are part of the lived experience of those who dwell in diasporas, have become the method by which I have been able to join my personal quest for the lost book of my childhood with my professional interest in understanding the interplay between subjective meanings and cultural meanings. In addition, it was through the pursuit of ethnography that I was able to undertake the magical, and also politicizing, journeys into the everyday reality of people living in the Spanish-speaking world, the world I longed to reclaim.

Agnon's story also made an impact on me as an ethnographer whose work in the Spanish-speaking world has continually raised questions about my often submerged Jewish identity. As I write this article, I am worried by Israel, as I am worried for Israel, and I no longer know what to think, or even how to think, about the situation we are living in at this time, which has world historical implications and will have world historical consequences. A story about the loss of one book by a provincial rabbinical scholar who suffered from low self-esteem is certainly of minor relevance given everything that is at stake now in Israel and Palestine. Yet I'm drawn to it as an argument, or metaphor, in support of the only kind of ethnographic storytelling I'm able to engage in now, which is storytelling that enacts what anthropologist Virginia Dominguez has called 'a politics of love and rescue' (Dominguez, 2000).

What moves me most about Agnon's story is not simply the pathos I experience as I identify with the rabbi who was willing to erase his scholarship out of a misguided sense that the world did not need his book. I am moved even more by the love of the man who tried to rescue the lost book, the love he felt for a book that was not his. I am moved by the gift which is at the story's core, the gift of wanting to save a book felt to be unworthy by the writer who produced it, the gift of loving someone who lacked self-love.

Bringing back stories from the places where I have dwelled

As ethnographers we are expected to travel somewhere, even if that somewhere is a return trip to a lost home, but always with the commitment to bring back a story. When I think about the places where I have dwelled as an anthropologist – in a small mountain village in northern Spain, in a town in Mexico 12 hours from the border, and most recently in my native Havana,

to which I have returned more than 30 times in the last 11 years – I could not have accomplished anything without the generosity of those who trusted me enough to let me take their stories from them so they could find a place in my books. The truth is the ethnographer cannot enact ‘a politics of love and rescue’ unless and until her informants choose to love and rescue her first.

I think of all the gifts I have received in my work as an ethnographer and I realize I cannot ever repay those who have given away their stories to me without asking for anything in return. Although fables of rapport are routinely dismissed in contemporary anthropology as romantic and naive, I have not yet become jaded enough to cease thinking that the ability to do our work as ethnographers depends on people being willing to talk to us freely and give us the gift of their stories. Of course, the stories are given in a context of complex intersubjective negotiations and exchanges, mutual expectations and desires informed by obvious power differences, in which the ethnographer, at a minimum, promises to maintain the social obligation of staying connected to her informants. I may be unusual in having been able to maintain a certain innocence about the increasing commodification of ethnographic encounters, not to mention the refusal of such encounters by would-be informants who have decided they no longer want anything to do with story-extracting ethnographers, even those who have owned up to their imperialist nostalgia. For better or worse, my ethnographic encounters have filled me with hope rather than despair and have given me faith in the emancipatory possibilities of a pursuit that I never forget is rooted in shame. Perhaps this is the inevitable result of my ethnographic practice being so closely interwoven with my personal quest as a woman of the Spanish-speaking diaspora.

Although as a budding ethnographer I wanted to work in Cuba, and traveled to the island in 1979 to try to make the necessary arrangements, the political moment had not yet arrived which would have made it possible for a Cuban-American anthropologist to be trusted to do fieldwork in her abandoned homeland. When I suggested to my advisors that I might, instead, do a study of the Cuban-American community, I was told that this project was too close to home and that I should travel abroad to truly experience the rite of passage of fieldwork. I was advised to go to Spain, a place which had already fascinated me as a young literature student, and where I would be able to use ‘my Spanish’ and still be immersed in a different culture. It wasn’t bad advice. In Santa María del Monte, the village in Spain where I first went in 1978 when I was 21, not knowing who I was, let alone knowing what I was to do there as an anthropologist, I came to an early recognition that everything depended on the ungrudging generosity of the strangers who let me live among them. It was in that village, to which I returned in 1987, a year after finishing my book about its history, that I lived

through the fundamental crisis which allowed me to become the only kind of ethnographer I could bear to be: a broken-hearted ethnographer.

That crisis came about because my return to Santa María in 1987 coincided with the moment when my beloved maternal grandfather was dying of cancer in Miami Beach. I had been told by my family to pursue my studies, that it was not good to be waiting for my grandfather to die, that surely he would still be there when I returned from my trip. Ironically, my reason for returning to Spain was to carry out research on attitudes toward death for a paper I had promised to deliver at the annual American anthropology conference. While in Spain, knowing that my grandfather was dying, I listened to people tell stories of grief about the loss of their loved ones and it was as if the volume was turned way up high in my heart. When the news came that my grandfather had died and that I could not get back to Miami Beach in time for the funeral, it was as if my heart was screaming. Comfort came from the strangers in Santa María who offered me words of consolation and sympathy, and I realized that hearing about their sorrow for the loss of their loved ones had prepared me to face the ache of death’s merciless finality.

Afterwards I was stricken by guilt, rage, and moral confusion. I suddenly found the displacement of anthropology to be cruel and senseless. Why had I been in Spain talking with strangers about death rather than being at my grandfather’s side gently offering him my last goodbye? Why was it that over the course of my work as an anthropologist I had become an expert on popular Catholicism and could recite the rosary in Spanish from memory, but I knew nothing of Jewish mourning rituals and had no idea how to honor my grandfather within the traditions of my own heritage? Haunted by these questions, I struggled with how to write my paper for the conference. And then it became clear to me that the loss of my grandfather in Miami Beach and my research findings about how Spanish villagers felt about the subject of death could not be separated. They were, they had to be, the same story. Identification and connection rather than distance, difference, and otherness are what I would seek as an ethnographer. I would use not only the observational and participatory methods of classical anthropology but the subtle forms of knowledge found in ineffable moments of intuition and epiphany. This was the basis for my paper, ‘Death and Memory’, which became the opening piece of my book, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Behar, 1996).

After writing that paper, there was no turning back for me. I knew that I wanted to keep searching for ways to evoke how intersubjectivity unfolds as a fundamental part of the representation of social reality. I wanted, most importantly, to discover the deep conjunctures that inform any effort to know the world beyond the self. For it was these conjunctures that could most fully reveal the process by which ethnographic knowledge is attained

in the highly charged moments of our fieldwork encounters. I came to see that in writing 'Death and Memory' I mixed together levels of experience that are not usually mixed. I created a counterpoint between the ethnographic stories of death in rural Spain, which required my objective presence as an ethnographer, and my own grandfather's death in Miami Beach, which had taken place in my pained absence. This unique convergence, with all its friction, poignancy, and contradiction, had a certain musicality. It conveyed a faith in the surrealist principle that joining together incongruous things can bring about an unexpected awareness, a slant of sharp, sublime light, an edgy form of knowing that dares to surprise the knower too. Curiously, in these situations, you yourself, the knower, didn't know fully what you knew until you wrote it down, until you told the story with you yourself included in it.

I went on to Mexico and found myself smack in the middle of the resentment and hurt that so many Mexicans feel when they reflect on what the Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa (1987: 2) has called 'the open wound' which is the border between the United States and Mexico. As a Cuban immigrant with a US passport I had gained the privilege of being able to cross back and forth. But I didn't know at first that this was a privilege. My hosts in Mexquitic, the Mexican town where my husband and I lived for three years, opened my eyes and politicized me, showing me how distinctions of race and class made it impossible for them to make the same crossing, the crossing that allowed me to do my ethnography. Esperanza Hernández, a street peddler from Mexquitic who mesmerized me with her stories about her life, gave me a necessary education, not only about borders, but about the possibility of seeking connection in spite of them. Even though there were other women who were easier to like, it was the tough and unforgiving Esperanza who stole my heart. She not only helped me to know my politics better but restored my faith in the power of stories to create bonds between strangers.

I wrote my book, *Translated Woman* (Behar, 1993), in awe of the possibility of our relationship, of a Cuban-American anthropologist and a Mexican street peddler being drawn together by the twisted threads of an interconnected colonial and neo-colonial history that had left Esperanza impoverished and borne me across the border from Cuba to the United States. Our relationship further inscribed an uneasy desire for womanly intimacy, in which were conjoined the stirrings of an international feminist desire, on my side, and the promise of our becoming *comadres*, spiritual kin with mutual obligations, on her side. The result of our shared production of knowledge was a book that Esperanza initially demanded only exist in the English language and only circulate 'on the other side', among the *gringos* of the United States, the mythical land across the border which she did not expect to ever set eyes upon. So maligned was Esperanza in her

hometown that she feared her female neighbors would ridicule her if they heard she'd told her life story to her *comadre* from the United States. Yet she was convinced of her need for justice and hoped that by telling me her story and having it be heard 'on the other side', she would ultimately find redemption. Her life story became a lost book that could only be found in translation.

Aware of the importance of being able to assess the theoretical lessons of Esperanza's story, I made a point in *Translated Woman* of turning to the literary texts of Chicanas, Latinas, African-American women, and Latin American writers as frameworks for reading her story. I deliberately tried to connect her story to more locally relevant frameworks out of a sense that ethnography needs to question what constitutes theory. The writings of Durkheim, Weber, Marx, and Foucault, among other works classified as 'theory', are essentially ethnographic texts that have been annotated as theoretical. My sense is that we tend to automatically reach for the work of such European theorists, which our canon has legitimated as translocal and applicable to myriad situations beyond their original settings, without always thinking about the way this reproduces Eurocentric prestige hierarchies of knowledge in the academy.

As part of my musing on textual relations of power, I also felt the need to attempt something that was taboo for classical anthropology: I not only presented Esperanza's life story, but in the very last chapter I explored my own interpretations and responses to her story, including the consequences that thinking about her story had for my own life. I wrote of my struggles to become an educated woman. I wrote of the awkward way that tenure was dished out to me at my university because my identity as both Cuban and Jewish made me difficult to classify. Anthropologists are supposed to keep quiet about their lives, so that their focus on 'the other' won't become obscured. But I thought it was important for readers to know how I came to be the one with the power to transport Esperanza's story across the border. The last chapter of the book was full of raw emotions about my own upward mobility and the uncertainty and ambivalence it reaped. Coming into power is neither easy nor pretty. I chose not to remove the thorns from my story. Not surprisingly, the chapter made many of my colleagues uncomfortable. Yet Latino and Latina students felt that it spoke to their own anxieties about entering the academy and praised me for my courage.

Recently, Esperanza has come to feel proud of the book of her life story and she has now asked me to prepare a Spanish edition of *Translated Woman*. She wants her children to be able to read her story. Her confidence has been boosted by the fact that a young priest from Mexquitic saw the book in Mexico City and congratulated her for being the subject of an important book. As I now work to 'untranslate' her translated tale to bring it back to its place of origin, I am facing many vexing problems. I am finding

that some of the theoretical and contextual elaborations that I present in the last section of the book are addressed to a non-Mexican, non-Latin American academic audience, and I have come to feel that much of this material should be cut out of the Spanish edition because it is going to be irrelevant to readers who are familiar with the historical, cultural, and religious context in which Esperanza's story emerges. The Spanish edition of the book is going to be more in the tradition of a *testimonio*, the testimonial literary genre that has a respected place in Cuban and Latin American letters. It will have fewer academic interventions and place more emphasis on Esperanza's story and the meaning of our encounter as differently situated women from the other América.

In my more recent work I have come full circle as a traveler and ethnographer. I am now engaged in an ongoing process of returning to Cuba, my place of birth, working as a diasporic anthropologist, poet, and filmmaker. I have traveled to Cuba regularly over the past 11 years. With every trip, I have re-enacted the primordial scene of my early flight from the island. Always, I am accompanied to the Jose Martí airport by Caridad Martínez, known by everyone as Caro, who is the Afro-Cuban woman who was my caretaker as a child. She came to the airport with us to say goodbye when we left in 1961 and she insists on being with me now, every time I leave Cuba to return to my work and my other life in the United States. During the course of so many trips to Cuba, I have established a relationship of trust and intimacy with Caro and her family. We have agreed to claim each other as kin. I am Caro's anchor to the past before the revolution and to her own younger self. In turn, Caro is my anchor in Cuba and the keeper of my childhood that was left unfinished there. She is the reason I return. She embodies and preserves the story of my past life in Cuba, which I cannot consciously remember. Together with me, she is crafting the story of our shared present, in which we are forging a connection that cannot help but acknowledge the history of our race and class differences, while we try at the same time to move into the future in a way that defies the cliché that brought us together in the first place.

Returning to Cuba in search of Caro, in search of my childhood, in search of something ineffable, has had a profound impact on my life and work. After years of restricting myself to academic prose, I started writing poems again when I went back to Cuba, poems which I write in English and then translate into Spanish and publish in Cuba. Returning to Cuba was such an emotionally moving experience for me that at first I could not be an ethnographer there. But I also came back to poetry in a deeper way, returning to what anthropologist James Fernandez has called the 'argument of images', returning to the poetry of the imagination, its invocations and evocations (Fernandez, 1986a). In *Persuasions and Performances*, Fernandez writes that 'anthropology begins with "revelatory incidents" . . . those especially

charged moments in human relationships which are pregnant with meaning' (Fernandez, 1986b: 215). I experienced such a 'revelatory incident' when Caro one day presented me with two honeymoon nightgowns of nylon and lace that had belonged to my mother and which she had salvaged from our old apartment in Havana after we left. Cubans who left the island in the 1960s were restricted to a single suitcase and there were precious things my mother had to leave behind. Through the years of revolution and dramatic social change, Caro still thought it important to salvage something that was not hers, something she deemed worthy of saving for another woman.

The nightgowns were made from the nylon and lace that my grandparents sold in their tiny fabric shop in Old Havana. When Caro pulled them out of a double-wrapped plastic bag and asked me to give them to my mother, since she did not expect that my mother would ever return to visit Cuba, I knew I was in the presence of the gift. Caro revealed to me the kinds of bridges that are possible between women, even when separated by race and class. My mother, a white Jewish woman, left Cuba in a hurry. The nightgowns stayed behind, but another woman, a black Cuban working-class woman, kept them for her, saved them for her, another woman who had no need to do so, returned them to her, because she had faith that their paths were meant to cross again.

Caro's gift of my mother's nightgowns has become the centerpiece of my current writing, which is a blend of ethnography, memoir, and fiction (Behar, 2000; 2001). I have embarked on a journey of the imagination, telling the story of my Jewish family in Cuba as seen from Caro's perspective. From my extensive reading on the subject of domestic workers, I have learned that they are ever-vigilant, keeping an eye on those whose houses they keep tidy and whose children they watch over. In the emerging narrative, Caro is a kind of anthropologist, observing the Jewish family to which she is connected through her domestic work, and trying to understand their beliefs and practices through her vision of the world as an Afro-Cuban woman who grew up in a humble household in the countryside where Santería was practiced. She observes, too, as the girl whom she once took care of, now a professional anthropologist, returns to the island to restore contact with her and turn her into a 'research subject'.

My hope is that this writing will make a contribution to the emerging genre of Latina letters in the United States, which seeks to negotiate the boundary between North America and Latin America by writing in English about experiences lived in the Spanish language. I also hope to provide a model for how to give an artistic voice to anthropological concerns about the crossing of cultural and class boundaries. Although I am aware that I take a huge risk in trying to write in the voice of an Afro-Cuban woman, I trust deeply that I will, through this writing, be able to claim the lost home of my imagination and that I will be able to give back to Caro a book that

will honor the grace with which, by her example, she has shown me how to think of history in a new way, where the burden of remembering is shared. Those lost nightgowns, like the lost book, have been found again because Caro enacted a politics of love and rescue before I had the words to call it that, to know it was that.

Adio Kerida: daring to come out of the Jewish closet

It was Caro who made it possible for me to return to Cuba, who allowed me to view Cuba as my homeland still, and afterwards I found a way to do ethnography again. As an ethnographer I had found it difficult to announce my Jewishness openly in the small places in Spain and Mexico where I spent so many years of my life, speaking my native Spanish, being accepted as a Latina. In those places where I was 'almost home', I often felt like a *conversa*, a 15th-century Jew-in-hiding. My Jewishness always separated me from the people with whom I wanted to claim an affinity. Finding myself in places where various forms of popular Catholicism were the only forms of acceptable religious identity, I kept quiet about being Jewish. Additionally, what has come to be known as the 'Jewish closet' in anthropology played an unconscious role in encouraging me to remain silent about Jewish issues and my own Jewishness (Dominguez, 1993; Frank, 1997). In Cuba, I was finally able to come out as a Jew, to embrace my Jewish identity in a Spanish-speaking country, and to begin to work on Jewish issues as an ethnographer.

The secular tolerance instilled in the population by the Cuban revolution, together with Cuba's long historical tradition of cultural pluralism, allowed me to emerge from the Jewish closet in my native land. Not only was I among people like Caro who knew about my Jewish heritage, I was also, for the first time, situated in a major city, in Havana, rather than in the countryside, as I had been in Spain and Mexico. This made it easy for me to make my way to the Patronato synagogue, located just a stone's throw from the apartment building where I lived as a child. I had been photographed in front of the synagogue as a child and been the flower girl there at the wedding of my mother's cousin the very night before we left Cuba, so it was a space resonant with meaning for me. The secretary and librarian of the synagogue remembered my family. I didn't know what I would find there, but every time I was in Cuba I felt compelled to attend Jewish services at the Patronato, even though I rarely attended Jewish services back in Michigan. Over time, I came to know the members of the small but vibrant community of a thousand Jews still left on the island. I found it striking that most of them were Sephardic rather than Ashkenazi Jews and so I began to explore the traces left by the Sephardic Jews in Cuba. This was during the period when I was making contact with a circle of Sephardic

intellectuals in the United States who were formulating a critique of the narrow definitions of Jewish identity produced by the dominant Ashkenazi-American majority. Jewish multiculturalism was at last coming into prominence. Suddenly I wasn't needing to explain my identity all the time. The new 'multiracial' box on the US census officially acknowledged the possibility of cultural and ethnic mixtures. A diasporic consciousness began to be part of public culture in the United States and this had an important general impact on the rethinking of identity.

In the case of the two identities that I know best, I was aware of how both Jews and Latinos were working to break out of the boxes of the way their identities had been formulated. This convergent search for new self-constructions of their communities reached a public level and even led to the organization of a Latino-Jewish summit in Washington, to which both Latino and Jewish political and intellectual leaders were invited. I was asked to attend as a Jewish Latina who might act as a bridge between the two communities and I began to see that I had a unique contribution to make as a Jewish ethnographer of the Spanish-speaking world. Within this newly discovered Latino-Jewish convergence, I learned that the Sephardic Jews were playing an important role because they are Jews of Spanish heritage. The Sephardic Jews are a living reminder of the repressed and hidden Jewish heritage of the Latino community. These Spanish-speaking Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492 because they refused to convert to Catholicism. They resettled in the former counties of the Ottoman Empire, where they lived peacefully among their Muslim neighbors and were warmly accepted, maintaining Spanish traditions until the early years of the 20th century. When the welcome mat grew thin, they began to migrate in large numbers to the Americas and later to Israel. Some of them, especially from the small towns around Istanbul, found their way to Cuba, among them my paternal grandparents.

Growing up with a Cuban mother who is Ashkenazi and a Cuban father who is Sephardic, I learned early on that there is more than one way of being Jewish. But this appreciation of Jewish multiculturalism did not come easily nor harmoniously. In my mother's family, my father was known as '*el turco*', the Turk, not only because his parents were from Turkey but because he was hot-tempered and unforgiving. When my mother would get angry at me, she'd say I was just like my father, just like the '*turcos*'. And yet, even though I was like the '*turcos*', the Sephardim were mysterious to me. I grew up closer to my mother's Yiddish-speaking side of the family and the Jewish education I received in Hebrew school was always oriented toward Ashkenazi traditions. As I entered my teenage years, my Sephardic identity became a vexed issue because that identity came to me from my father and we were locked in a contest of wills. In our life together, my father was usually either absolutely furious at me or not speaking to me at all. As a young woman I upset him deeply by going to college against his will and as

a grown woman I upset him by writing stories about him and my mother that he thought dishonored them. When I began to travel regularly to Cuba in the 1990s, I further upset him by returning to the country from which he had fled in the early 1960s, and he viewed my desire to reconnect with Cuba as yet another manifestation of my ingratitude and disrespect.

Naturally, given this history of heartbreak between my Sephardic father and me, I knew I had to prepare a gift for him that would allow us both to share in the Sephardic Cuban legacy with joy and with pride. That gift became my documentary film, *Adio Kerida/Goodbye Dear Love*, which I dedicated to my father. Although I couldn't convince my father to go to Cuba with me, I made a film for him, to show him what kind of people we are, we the Sephardic Jews, with our strong tempers and our inability to forgive. For despite the years of conflict with my father, I had never given up the surname Behar, the name I inherited from my father, the Béjar, which is still the name of a town in northwestern Spain. As I embarked on the making of *Adio Kerida*, it is this name that I would find all over Cuba, both among the living Sephardic Jews I met and the many departed Sephardic Jews whose tombs abound in the cemeteries of the island.

The film is structured as a journey which begins in Havana with an exploration of my longing for memory. It then moves to a series of encounters with Jews currently living on the island, continues in Miami with a focus on Jewish Cubans there, including my father's relatives, goes on to New York, where I go with my parents to various sites of our immigrant passage, and then moves to Philadelphia, where my brother gently pokes fun at my need to travel to places left behind. The film ends in Michigan, where I reflect on my uncertainty about knowing where home really is. The film is at once personal and ethnographic, another way of telling a counterpointed story. I worked for three years on the film. I thought it would be a small project, something I'd get done over a couple of weekends. It was good I didn't know how much work it would take, because I might not have jumped into it so easily. I accumulated more than a 100 hours of footage, with my students doing most of the camera work as I interacted with people, allowing me to be present in the scenes, which I felt was essential for my reflexive methodology. I eventually came up with a three-hour timeline, which I then trimmed to two hours and then down to 80 minutes, and recently I've also prepared a version for television circulation that is just under 60 minutes.

It was with great difficulty and with great pain that I kept cutting my story down. As a scholar, I was often frustrated by the editing process, because I felt I knew so much more than I could show in the film. If I narrated too much or explained too much, then the film became a lecture rather than a film. If I included all the interviews I adored, the film would become confusing. I'd be on the verge of tears as I let go of dozens of interviews that I loved but which didn't fit into the story. The story, I

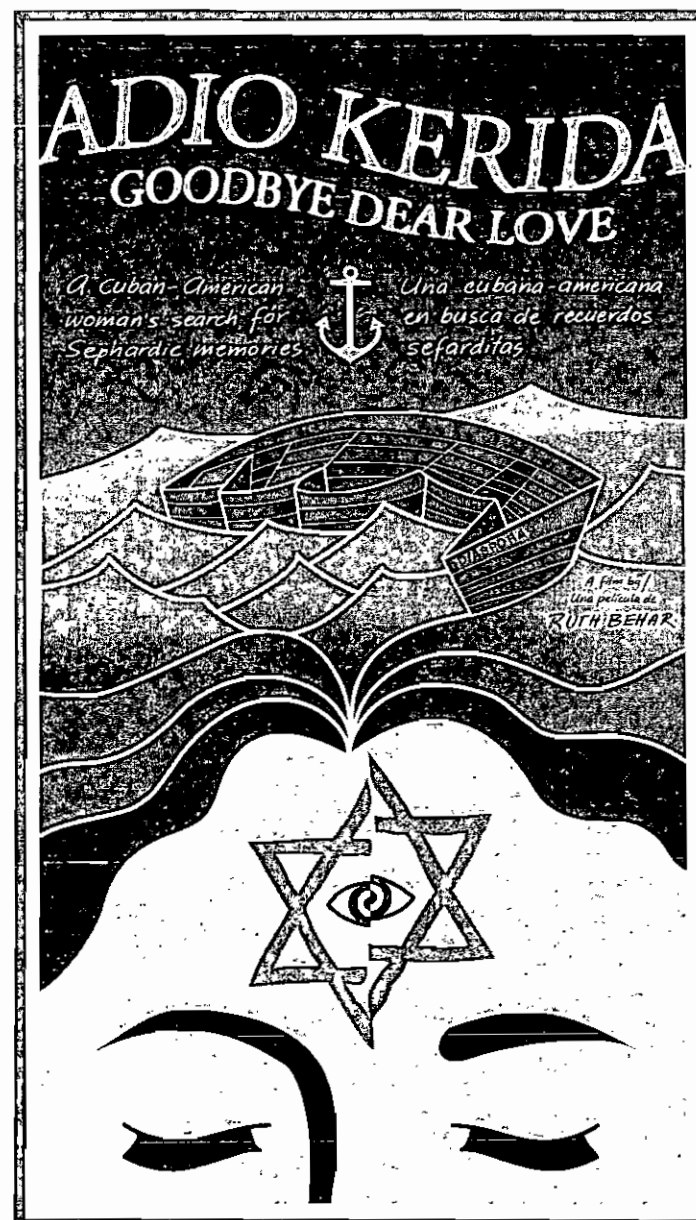


Figure 1

gradually came to realize, was rooted in the fundamental conflict between my father's idea that all goodbyes are final and you should never look back, and my own desire, as an immigrant daughter and an ethnographer, to search for memories and meaning in our abandoned Cuba. As I edited, I began to structure the film in terms of layers of goodbye and return, focusing on the way Sephardic identity was maintained while Cuban culture was also adopted by those who had been 'turcos'. All the interesting interviews that didn't fit this theme had to be left out.

The obvious and unavoidable constraint in working with film is that production values have to be excellent, or at the least acceptable enough to be able to see and hear clearly the images on the screen. It was wrenching to have to throw out crucial interviews that could not be used because of technical mishaps, camera work that was too shaky, sound that just wasn't good enough. On the other hand, there were scenes I tried to re-film, going back with better equipment and asking people to talk to me again about issues I wanted to address, but this footage always came out too stilted. Inevitably I would end up letting it go and using the original footage, which had some technical flaws but was more lively, spontaneous and unrehearsed. Indeed, the ethnographer's realist commitment to documenting things 'as they are', instead of how one might ideally wish them to be, triumphed in all these cases, both because the original footage had a greater truthfulness and because it maintained the fundamental element of surprise, the beauty and mystery of finding the unexpected stories that are at the heart of the ethnographic quest. The entire project was an act of faith as people on both sides of the ocean border dared to entrust me with their stories. Many of those who participated on the US side, like my father, won't go back to Cuba, while those on the Cuban side often stated that they would never leave Cuba, but all agreed to participate in the same film because they had faith that I would not harm them, that their stories were safe with me. I made a point of not using any interviews that I felt might put people in a precarious position in Cuba, and I also withheld criticism of the Jewish Cuban community in Miami. Working on any project that concerns Cuba, especially if you are Cuban-American, is always a matter of walking a tightrope, if you want to hold on to the privilege of being allowed to keep returning to Cuba to do research and you don't want to burn your bridge to Miami either.

There were provocative topics I chose not to address. Instead, I focused on the durability of the 'culture', because everyone could feel good about the cultural survival of the Sephardic Jews of Cuba, everyone could agree that the culture united them, however loosely, across political and economic borders. The film balanced the nostalgia and longing for Cuba felt by those who left with a sense of humor about the remembered island. Music in the film, ranging from Sephardic songs to Spanish flamenco to American jazz to Argentine tango to Cuban boleros, offered a lush sense of comfort for the

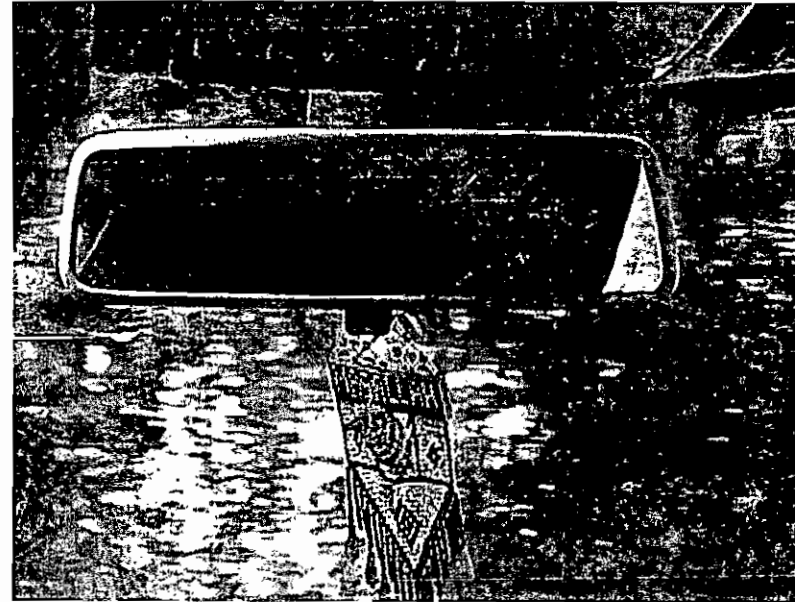


Figure 2

melancholia of diaspora. The risks I took were in showing how widely inter-married people are within the community and therefore how diverse the community is in real life. The use of filmic images allowed me to make the strong visual point that not all Jewish Cubans are white and middle class, that, in fact, they now include Afro-Cubans on the island. The community also emerges as politically diverse and holding different positions about the revolution. My critical gaze was directed most openly at the uncertain impact that well-meaning Jewish American organizations and visitors have had on the Jewish community in Cuba, which feels it is now constantly on display to these outsiders.

It has been very fulfilling to receive positive responses to the film by the Jewish community in both Havana and Miami. Even my father likes it! As the film now travels to both Latino and Jewish film festivals all over the United States, and finds a Spanish-speaking audience through airings on Spanish and Latin American television, it is being embraced as a vivid portrayal of the way complex, mixed identities are shaped through the interplay of subjectivity and history. Through the film, I am being pushed into the public arena in new and challenging ways that are forcing me to think about how ethnographers need to be more active players in debates about identity and culture.

In defense of popularization

Several years ago I worked with a New York Latino theater group, PREGONES, to create a stage adaptation of *Translated Woman* and found that to be an exciting way to bring anthropological ideas about translation and border crossing to a broader audience. Making *Adio Kerida* has similarly given me a fresh perspective on the possibility of communicating our ideas to audiences who might not otherwise learn of our research. While we often speak of applying anthropology to public policy, I think we can also apply anthropology to the arts in the widest sense of the term, to the different arts of representation. If we can get our stories out there, in readable books, in theater, in film, and on television, I believe we can make a significant contribution to public knowledge and public debate.

Within anthropology and in the academy in general, we tend to express disdain for the 'popularizers', but I have begun to feel that there is a legitimate need for us to learn to popularize aspects of our research and to make our knowledge accessible and our journeys a subject of public interest, because otherwise we will continue to talk just to ourselves in the academy. There is nothing wrong with just talking to ourselves, of course. But if we do want our voices to have an impact on public culture and debate, we need to think differently about how we do our work. Certainly we can produce work in more than one genre and more than one voice. We can produce work that will satisfy us as scholars and also produce work that communicates the essence of our ideas in a more democratic and distilled form. If this can be done in the same work, all the better. If it can't, it can be achieved in different works published or distributed in a variety of venues, from newspaper Op-Ed pages to magazines published in the various countries where we do fieldwork, rather than in a limited number of scholarly journals.

I have come to believe strongly that in order for ethnography to survive, we must learn to produce ethnographic work that is more accessible than it has been in the past, and work that is also artistically satisfying. If we don't get our ethnographies out there, I fear that they will become lost books. In the meantime, the ethnography that does flourish in public spaces is being produced by people working outside of the academy who typically are not credentialed ethnographers. I think of the amazing work that dedicated documentary filmmakers are doing, that investigative journalists are doing, or of how a performance artist like Anne Devere Smith gathers stories from real people in all their rich diversity in order to create ethnographically grounded theatrical vignettes. Ethnography is not the property of anthropology, sociology, the social sciences, or the academy. It seems to me that ethnography is flourishing in a wide variety of contexts, but it flourishes not by its name, but as the invisible genre, as the lost book.

As I see it, one key failing in the way we approach ethnography is that

we tend to teach courses in which ethnographies are read, but rarely do we teach students how to write ethnography. Is ethnography a form of creative non-fiction? If it is, shouldn't we be able to teach courses that focus on the craft of ethnography? How can people write interesting ethnographies if they don't pay attention to craft? Could we agree on the fundamental elements of a good ethnography? What kind of relationship needs to exist in ethnography between characters, plot, voice, place, observer, critique, theory, and previous scholarly literature? We teach courses on methods, on theory, on specific areas of the world, but ethnography itself remains elusive, which is why ethnography ends up having to be figured out by each ethnographer when her or his time comes to write one.

But even if we teach ethnography as writing, perhaps in the end ethnography will still remain elusive, because every ethnography emerges from a unique encounter between an ethnographer and those who become the subjects of the ethnography. These encounters are not repeatable, not easily verifiable. We must ultimately accept ethnographies on trust, and hope that the ethnographer was listening well. Every ethnographer, to some extent, has to reinvent the genre of ethnography to make it fit the uniqueness of his or her fieldwork experience. In a sense, this is true for writing across the genres. We can recognize a novel when we see one, but James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Ernest Hemingway approached the writing of fiction from different perspectives, so even though their fictions are all described as novels they do not resemble one another. Yet there is probably more agreement on how to evaluate a novel than there is on how to evaluate an ethnography. Perhaps because ethnography, as a self-conscious literary pursuit, is a relatively new genre compared to autobiography, poetry, and fiction, we have yet to know exactly what the criteria should be for assessing its value and meaning. But I don't think we're going to arrive at these criteria until we can get over our fear of 'going popular' and dare to let our ethnographies be read in the harsh glare of the public eye, which may well be the most grueling but necessary and enlightening way to discover if what we have to say is significant beyond the safe space of our academic homes.

Not alone

Fifteen years ago, as I was beginning to experiment with the voice of the broken-hearted ethnographer, I didn't know how to describe what I was doing. I kept using the counterpoint method in my writing, weaving together ethnographic encounters with the personal stories that cut through them, but I assumed it was my own particular idiosyncrasy that was leading me to produce work that didn't fit the classical norms of academic writing. I had no idea, at first, of the extent to which my voice was part of a mosaic

of voices, which in time would create a vigorous and unsettling interdisciplinary intellectual movement. I thought I was doing what I was doing because I was too sentimental, or because I was melodramatic, or because I was Cuban and suffered from that terrible Cuban malaise of exceptionalism, or because I was an immigrant and so was always uneasy about my bearings, or because I was the first person in my family to receive an advanced degree and had to write in ways that my mother could understand, or because I was self-centered and wanted everything to connect back to me, or because I was an imposter who'd slipped into the academy through the back door and couldn't do 'proper' academic work.

As it turns out, I was not alone in my resolve to find a way to do scholarship which refused anonymity and authority and instead sought connection, intimacy, and passion. I soon discovered that people in numerous fields, including literature, music, film, history, anthropology, law, medicine, mathematics, psychology, and the natural sciences, were grappling with the sense of exasperation and frustration they felt with classical forms of uncovering and relaying knowledge (Freedman and Frey, in press). By the end of the century a wide range of scholars, especially in the United States, were consciously blurring the illusory line between 'hard' and 'soft' disciplines, and experimenting with diverse and compelling first-person forms of writing (Steedman, 1987; Miller, 1991; Williams, 1991; Okeley and Callaway, 1992; Freedman and Frey, 1993; Rosaldo, 1993; Kaplan, 1994; Limón, 1994; Suleiman, 1994; Jamison, 1995). This movement wasn't simply a spillover from the 'memoir boom'. Deep, critical self-examination turned out *not* to be an escape, a vacation, from the complexities of the world we live in, but a way of being more present in this world. The common project came out of a burning need to be present, to be there, unflinchingly, facing up to who we are as we keep daring to know the world.

Our world now draws us closer to one another but leaves each of us in peril of becoming ever more anonymous, ever more identified with our social security numbers and our frequent flyer numbers and our credit cards. Such anonymity, I must hasten to add, is the price of privilege. The sadder anonymity, the truly tragic vulnerability, is that of the large populations around the world mired in hunger, poverty, oblivion, and underdevelopment. Despite the finer quality of life for the privileged few, humanity has never been so fragile, so susceptible to massive car crashes, explosions, the killing hatred of the excluded, so susceptible to ravaging illnesses like AIDS and cancer, so susceptible to the nasty fallout of an environment that we ourselves have damaged more relentlessly in the past century than in the thousands of years that preceded our existence on this planet.

Our world now is characterized by increasing anonymity, increasing suffering, increasing uncertainty, increasing recognition of too many far-away others who cannot be helped all at once. As the globalized world

beckons and terrifies simultaneously, there will be ethnographers who will say that this is the time to return to the detached voice of authority of the past. They will say that the reflexive musings of broken-hearted ethnographers are nothing more than solipsism and the palm reading of gypsies. They will say that it is time to address the serious issues at hand, with proper distance and severity. But I would argue that uncritically assuming the mask of objectivity again, as if the reflexive turn had never happened, will only give us a false security. I say that more than ever, if ethnography is to realize its emancipatory promise, what we are going to need are strong, personal, heartfelt voices, the voices of love, trust, faith and the gift.

One thing remains constant about our humanity – that we must never stop trying to tell stories of who we think we are. Equally, we must never stop wanting to listen to each other's stories. If we ever stopped, it would all be over. Everything we are as human beings would be reduced to a lost book floating in the universe, with no one to remember us, no one to know we once existed.

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