

ETHNOGRAPHY

Cherishing Our Second-Fiddle Genre

RUTH BEHAR

Given the cultural importance of the millennium . . . we would like to . . . include . . . reflections on ethnography by the people who have shaped this approach during the last decades of the twentieth century. Rather than heavily referenced manuscripts, we would like your personal reflections on one or more of the following kinds of questions: Where has ethnography been? Where is it going? Where should it go and why should it go there?

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WHERE HAS ETHNOGRAPHY BEEN?

Ethnography was always a second-fiddle genre. Bronislaw Malinowski, the famed practitioner of the form, admits as much in his *Diary*, where he continually expressed his longing to be writing a poem, a memoir, a letter, a novel, anything but ethnography. He dreamed of writing great fiction, such as *The Heart of Darkness*. Instead, in his classic 1922 work, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, he systematically noted down his observations on the magical beliefs, mythology, systems of exchange, and canoe building techniques of the natives of the Trobriand Islands. This writing, which used a dispassionate and distant voice that studiously avoided any discussion of his personal life and emotions, became the model of ethnography. He reserved

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for *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*, published by his widow after his death, his strong feelings of resentment against the natives, his bouts of loneliness, and his desperation to be done with his fieldwork, as well as his racist erotic fantasies about local women and latent homosexual desires toward local men.

After the *Diary* came to light in 1967, there were those who believed we should ignore its existence and just keep writing ethnography as if it had never been published. How they wished Malinowski's *Diary* had stayed hidden in a drawer! Concerned that it could sully the reputation of Malinowski's ethnography, from which anthropology as a discipline had learned the rituals of fieldwork and writing up, and fearful that anthropology might lose its comfortable refuge as a social science within the academy, some of Malinowski's intellectual heirs chose to pretend that the *Diary* was of little importance, the forgivable midnight scribbles of a devoted and stressed-out ethnographer.

But then, there were those who sang a praisesong for the widow, rejoicing at the appearance of the great ancestor's *Diary*, for it provided an opportunity to ask disturbing but necessary questions about what could and could not be said in an ethnography, what desires could and could not be mentioned in an ethnography. It became possible to see how a border patrol had been created that sought to keep autobiography and fiction from entering into the realm of ethnography. New ethnographies could then emerge, responding to Malinowski's quandary about the licit and illicit text, and challenging the idea that the project of observing and imagining the other is incommensurable with the project of observing and imagining the self.

Whether afterward you kept on writing ethnography as usual or struggled to write ethnography differently, the *Diary* revealed an inescapable truth: Malinowski needed to keep it because there were ugly, smutty things he wanted to say about the (black) natives and his own desires that he could not say aloud, in polite (white) company. Ethnography became the genre that was silent about the privileges of gender, race, class, and nationality, the genre that was silent about power, the genre that was silent about desire. The unspeakable, like a kind of pornography, was to be inscribed in the ethnographer's diary, and kept

secret from the natives (who ideally were illiterate anyway), and discussed only in hushed whispers with the colleagues back home.

And so, the legacy of the *Diary*, which is inseparable from the very birth of ethnography, is ultimately a legacy of shame—of Malinowski's shame. Our shame too, for we cannot ignore our complicity with the history that makes us ethnographers today.

WHERE IS IT GOING?

Yet clearly, *it* is going somewhere, regardless of this legacy of shame. Otherwise, there would not be an entire journal devoted to the subject of contemporary ethnography. Otherwise, there would not be increasing numbers of people across the disciplines professing to be doing *it*. Otherwise, there would not be so many experts teaching others the tools of the trade in a new flurry of manuals about ethnographic methodology and forms of writing.

Speaking for myself, the dream of my youth was to be a poet and writer, but first, I had to become an ethnographer. I became an ethnographer because I had lost my home in Cuba and was drawn to anthropology, the discipline that invented fieldwork to give a name to its ceaseless wandering and search for home. I became an ethnographer because in college, I lost confidence in my poems and stories and was rendered so speechless I thought I had aphasia. I became an ethnographer because I thought ethnography was a second-fiddle genre that even a failed poet and writer such as myself, with a tongue split between Spanish and English, could pull off. I became an ethnographer because my second-fiddle writing got me a job with tenure. I am still an ethnographer because it pays the rent and the health insurance and my return trips to Cuba.

Like Melville out at sea with the whales, I have served a long apprenticeship as an ethnographer. And I am grateful to ethnography. Because it is such a humble genre, I have never put it on a pedestal, never worshipped it, as I do the poem and the novel. Ethnography is writing I actually did, rather than writing I dreamed of doing; it is writing that helped me to believe I had a

voice at a time when I felt utterly unable to speak. Ethnography was my writing therapy; and it worked. I am writing poems and stories again, even when no one asks me for them, even though they do not pay.

Something I could not have imagined has happened in the course of my doing ethnography for the past fifteen years. Although it has been difficult for me to part with my youthful prestige hierarchy about creative writing being superior to ethnographic writing, I no longer see such a wide gulf between them. Fiction and poetry, at their best, continue to inspire in me a kind of awe that I do not feel even for the most laudable ethnographies. But I also find that fiction and poetry, at their worst, can be more offensive to my sensibility than a boring ethnography.

In examining recent Cuban American novels, which describe a culture with which I am intimately familiar, I often become distressed at the self-orientalism I perceive in the ways members of my own immigrant community exoticize our stories in their representations. Santería, the African Cuban working of spirit rooted in Yoruba beliefs that survived the oppression of Catholic missionization and the butchery of slavery, is portrayed in such a facile and inaccurate way in some fiction that I actually find myself wishing the author were a better ethnographer. So strong has been my reaction to the Cuban American fiction I have read that I have begun my own novel, mixing memoir, ethnography, and imaginary stories to try to understand how the African Cuban woman who was my caretaker as a child perceived my Jewish Cuban immigrant family. In the novel, she plays the role of the native anthropologist, as women domestic workers commonly do, observing Jewish rituals and the yearnings of the Jewish Cuban characters from the critical perspective of Santería and African Cuban history. 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.

Fiction suffers, I have come to recognize, indeed it becomes painful to read, when its imaginative web is spun from threads of sloppy and disrespectful ethnography. My hope is that my ethnographic research on Santería and Jewish cultures in Cuba, as well as my own personal experience of these realities, will

give depth and passion to my fiction. I am betting on my theory that fiction is as good as the ethnography it is based on (just as, I suppose, ethnography is as good as the fiction it is based on). Or maybe, I just need to convince myself that my long apprenticeship as an ethnographer has not been in vain?

The truth is genres are more blurred than ever. Research and eyewitnessing have become fundamental elements of twentieth-century poetry and fiction. And we recognize nowadays that excellent writing can flourish in any genre. Poems and novels can frequently fail to deliver what we classically expected of them: catharsis, the education of our sentiments and morals, and the sheer pleasure of making the world anew by saying things in ways they have never been said before. Programs in creative writing now regularly include the recently invented category of "creative nonfiction" to recognize the plethora of outstanding works that engage with real life in all its glory and mundane horror. The "memoir boom" of recent years has shown how hungry readers are for "true stories" personally felt and poetically told. In the realm of ethnography, we have just emerged from nearly two decades of discussion about the nature of the rhetorics, allegories, metaphors, and fictions that undergird the construction of seemingly innocent accounts of other worlds. The positive result of all this blurring of genres is that we now have a fluid field of hybrid texts that baffle every effort at easy categorization and that respond to the desire, which is a hallmark of our century, for stories based on the testimony of lived experience.

Nevertheless, there is a history and a continuing practice that is unique to ethnography. I believe that ethnography comes from tremendous longing. It is a form of thinking, writing, and being-in-the-world, born of unrequited love, because there were other things we wanted to do in life, other things we wanted to be. These longings make the work of ethnography both an incredibly creative occupation and a frighteningly uncharted territory; they are what gives the genre its pathos.

Because I could not write poems, I wrote ethnography embedded with my poetic longings. Other ethnographers have written into their ethnographies their desires to be dancers, musicians, economists, political scientists, psychologists.

There are no rules, no maps. There is the memory of what ethnography was in the old days when its pursuit was limited to a private club of privileged travelers, and there is the blank page of the present. We can verse ourselves in the tradition of ethnographic writing; but in the end, no two ethnographies are alike. The bottom line about ethnography is that it is about forming relationships; it is about the search for connection within and across borders. The text is a record of a particular set of interactions between a particular observer and her/his particular subjects. Those interactions can never be exactly reproduced again. Ethnography is reinvented with every journey. That is why any ethnography is by definition an "experimental ethnography."

If we do not have a set of explicit criteria for judging whether something is "good ethnography" or whether it is even ethnography at all, should we despair? Do I confuse things further by saying that I think there is an art to ethnography? What I mean by this is that ethnography must be done with grace, with precision, with an eye for the telling detail, an ear for the insight that comes unexpectedly, with a tremendous respect for language, with a compassion for homesickness, and yes, with a love of beauty—especially, of beauty in places where it usually is not looked for.

There is no question that such a view of ethnography raises the stakes considerably. If our second-fiddle genre, once so unthreatening, is to be judged by some of the same criteria as other forms of creative writing and art, that means students must receive some orientation before they set off on their journeys of witnessing. I fervently believe this kind of education is essential and that is why I teach a graduate course in ethnographic writing. My students do not just come from anthropology. Ethnography, the genre that once belonged to anthropologists writing about exotic others who had been abandoned by historians, psychologists, sociologists, and literary critics, is now taken seriously by a wide array of disciplines, which increasingly are urging students to become proficient in its unwieldy "qualitative methods." Over the years, I have worked with students in anthropology, education, literature, history, creative writing, ethnic studies, nursing, and psychology, all of

whom come to my seminar with similar concerns about the possibilities and limits of representing lived experience.

I never talk about qualitative methods, but I do give students writing exercises to help them think about the elements that I feel are indispensable to ethnography. I usually begin by having them reflect on the kind of observer they think they are and the dilemmas they have faced being placed in the role of observer. I then have them write about a person who is different from them and ask them to discuss within the piece how they negotiated the telling of the other person's story. I tell them to describe a new setting by writing a series of letters as if they were "in the field" writing to someone back home. In another exercise, I tell them to describe a place where they once lived, using what Toni Morrison calls "emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared." I have them read some new experiments in "auto-ethnography" and ask them to choose one they think is a flop and pretend that the author is a friend to whom they must relay constructive criticism without betraying their own sensibilities. Forced to explain why something flopped, students must develop their own criteria for successful ethnographic writing. And then they plunge in and do their own ethnographic writing.

In the work being done by my students, who are among the next generation of ethnographers, I feel that I can catch a glimpse of where ethnography is going. And I am struck by the fact that students—at least those who radiate toward a "vulnerable observer" like me—are overwhelmingly expressing a strong need to understand deeply their own sense of emotional, ethical, political, and historical connection to the intellectual projects they are taking on. There is the Irish American student, born of a mixed Protestant and Catholic marriage, who feels compelled to do research in Belfast on the way efforts at peace and reconciliation must confront the historical memory of colonization, conflict, and struggle that inform everyday life; yet, fearing that her journey will become only personal, a search for roots in a romanticized image of Irish traditions, she wants to avoid looking up distant cousins in Ireland, at least until she is further along in her research. There is another Irish American student, the son of an upper-class Catholic docent mother and

doctor father who chose to become "WASPy" (in his words) and leave behind their Irishness; he is grappling with the question of how emotional withdrawal within his family and the high grades he received from teachers in "progressive" private schools when, as a white male, his expressed interest in and sympathy toward working class Latino people in Chicago has drawn him to the study of poverty and abandonment among Latino and urban Latin American youth. He trembles as he tells the story of a troubled ten-year-old Latino boy whom he had to hold for three hours to prevent him from throwing himself out a window. In telling that story, he remembers how his father would isolate himself in a fortress of silent anger after a patient had died and how his unreachableness marked him as a child. There is the Chicano literature student who is examining what it means to be a Latino in the academy by telling the story of his housemate, a white working-class woman from a small town in Michigan whose college degree brought her little of the rewards she dreamed of, beyond a closet full of fine china plates, linen napkins, and a few incomplete sets of silverware. To him, this woman of mainstream America is terribly exotic; but as he writes about her, he finds himself reflecting on both his and her unfulfilled yearnings for a home in a neighborhood of transient and often rowdy undergraduates. There is the Chicana anthropology student who is writing about folk healers back home in South Texas; every word she puts down about the healers and their herbs and incantations is a tribute to her father, a janitor who nurtured her love of learning by rescuing books and encyclopedias from the trash for her. There is the African American student who has learned to speak Cuban Spanish flawlessly and is studying the popular music of the island; he is a drummer and each day practices chanting the liturgies of the Santería religion, based in Yoruba beliefs, which he recognizes, sadly, survived in Cuba because slavery was abolished so late in the nineteenth century on the island. There is the Jewish American student from the School of Education, mother of four, who is exploring the humiliation and uncertainty women suffer in returning to school after previous careers. She herself is similar in some ways to the women she studies, and she has learned that there are aspects of her identity she must keep secret in the

academy; she must not divulge that she is a mother of a large family, nor must she let people know that she is an observant Jew who often must miss classes because of her religious commitments. There is another Jewish American student, of secular background, whose family survived the war in Poland, now doing fieldwork in Warsaw on how Jewish identity is being reconstructed amid the contradictory claims of memory and the commercialization of the Holocaust. Against her family's wishes, she has returned to a site of trauma and pain because she feels drawn to forge a project that includes both Jewish and Polish quests for meaning out of the terrible shared inheritance of the Holocaust. Rather than smoothing them away, she keeps the discomforts and contradictions of her research in the open, in full view.

Ethnography, if these examples are any indication, is moving in many exciting different directions at once. The genre that once could only accommodate writing about primitives and savages has become a most democratic genre. Not only is it interdisciplinary and intercultural but it also accommodates an incredibly wide range of commitments to the telling of stories. It continues to be a genre that chronicles strange, often unexpected encounters, and demands an especially attentive listening, looking, feeling, and being there. But the journeys that are taken now, in our postcolonial era, are accountable to history, memory, the emotions, identity, passion, and the soul in ways they have never been before. Maybe what has changed most dramatically in our time is that there no longer is a justification for keeping a secret diary in the field. Ethnographers so thoroughly question their presuppositions now before embarking and wear their hearts so openly on their sleeves that there isn't any place for them to hide.

WHERE SHOULD IT GO, AND WHY SHOULD IT GO THERE?

Writing in 1928, Walter Benjamin said, "Let no thought pass incognito, and keep your notebook as strictly as the authorities keep their register of aliens." This advice, from a contemporary

of Malinowski's, replies to the question of where ethnography should go with discomforting irony.

Benjamin's words conjure up a potent image of how ethnography is connected to power, to systems of inclusion and exclusion, to the control of borders, to the definition of who is "the alien," who is "the other." Ethnography has a long tradition of being aligned with power; some of our most talented ancestors were conquerors, explorers, missionaries, and inquisitors.

Since the radical movements of the 1960s, a major goal has been to shake ethnography's association with power, to make self-conscious the denial of power inherited from Malinowski. In the past four decades, ethnography has been reconceptualized, thanks to anticolonial, reflexive, feminist, and critical historical approaches that questioned the very idea of ethnography while undertaking it anew as a project calling for the mutual production of knowledge between ethnographers and their subjects. That has been a worthwhile goal, but many ethnographers are now asking whether decolonization at the level of the text is sufficient. It is becoming ever more difficult and contradictory—and yet more urgent—to maintain emancipatory intellectual ideals within the flawed and highly unequal systems of our postutopian world.

I cannot say that I know, in this era of compassion fatigue and moral flabbiness, where ethnography should go, but I believe that there is a unique role that ethnographers can and must play as mediators, ambassadors, translators, and commentators within, across, and between cultures. We are not alone in this process, and our comrades now are the African American, Latina/Latino, Native American, Asian American, Jewish American, and gay minorities in the United State's own backyard, the creative writers, artists, filmmakers, and activists whose reflections on issues of difference, otherness, the complexities of translation, the need to question Western hegemony, the politics of representation, and similar topics are of crucial relevance to our work. Multiculturalism and other social movements of witnessing, of being there, of claiming identity and speaking for it, together with the fastest-paced mobility, immigration, and diasporic crisscrossing that human civilization has ever known, are increasingly making ethnography a crucial

part of the new vocabulary of our social contract on the eve of the millennium.

Outside of the academy, ethnography has been liberated from its confinement to linear nonfiction argumentative prose. One finds ethnography now in the shape of stories by the Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros, fiction by the African American writer Alice Walker, and memoir by Sephardic Guatemalan writer Victor Perera, among others. And one finds artists who are explicitly turning to ethnographic methods to anchor their work more fully within social concerns and cultural debates. For example, the Latino performance artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña produced a piece called "The Couple in the Cage" in which they pretended to be recently discovered primitives on display. They performed the work in natural history museums, art galleries, and outdoor plazas in the United States and Europe, and they had a film crew document the response of the audience to their hoax. This research method allowed them to collect a broad spectrum of opinions on the way contemporary people understand primitivity. Coco Fusco then made an intriguing film that documented both their performance and the audience response. In another example of the meshing of ethnography and art, the African American choreographer Bill T. Jones conducted research on the movements of nonprofessional dancers suffering from AIDS to create a dance work that drew from their feelings about the body. "Still/Here," the product of his research, weaves his empirical findings into his choreography.

Of course, these creative writers and artists do not call themselves ethnographers, nor do they have anything to gain by doing so. Why call yourself an ethnographer unless you are seeking to obtain or maintain a position in the academy? Ethnography is still a second-fiddle genre, let us not forget, and it is best to pursue it undercover, so no one will know. After all, the general public, even when well educated, has never heard of ethnography. And there is good reason for that. With few exceptions, ethnographies are rarely memorable to anyone but those within the field being described. Why? Because in the end, they are works for the academy, and so they must explain rather than show, tell rather than narrate, cite rather than imagine, justify

rather than dream, and most tragically, turn vigorous flesh-and-blood people into ponderous slugs of theory.

Not that I am against theory. Nor am I suggesting that the enterprises of writing ethnography and of doing theory are inimical to each other. What I do find tiresome is the habit of using whatever theory happens to be fashionable, whether it is Gramsci on hegemony, or Foucault on sexuality, or Spivak on "can the subaltern speak," or Bourdieu on practice, as a substitute for really engaging with the tough questions posed by those whom we encounter on our journeys as ethnographers. When ethnographers working in far corners of the globe are all citing the same two pages from the work of the latest trendy theorist, without reflecting on the politics of how that theory travels, you can be sure they have killed the life in their ethnography. Theory always gets bent out of shape by ethnography. If more ethnographers could tell the story of how that happens, we might find ourselves playing first violin for a change.

It is my sense that if ethnography is to have a life beyond the academy, it will need to move closer to the arts, to all of the arts—visual, musical, theatrical, cinematic, and literary. I found that my book *Translated Woman* acquired a second life when I collaborated with PREGONES, a Latino theater group based in New York, on a stage adaptation of the book. By using original music, song, movement, and a range of characters and scenes, PREGONES was able to communicate my ideas about the politics and ethics of cultural translation and the complexities of doing feminist ethnography in a way that is comprehensible and entertaining to a wide audience, including farmworkers and working-class urban Latinos who would find my book inaccessible.

Ethnography has an obvious tie to the theater. The live aspect of theater, the fact that the actors are palpably there, acting as a counter to the mechanical reproduction that surrounds us, assures us of our humanity, of our living, breathing reality. That live aspect of theater has the capacity to mimic the live aspect of how ethnography gets done in the act of storytelling and story-listening. The arts—and especially the theater arts—create a space to envision the possibility of true intercultural communication and social change. For us to transform reality, we must

first be able to imagine—to stage and thus recover—our utopias.

Whether we study the arts, collaborate with artists, or become ethnographer-artists ourselves, by moving ethnography into the wider world, we will come to know its relevance and endurance. But what we must remember to always take with us is the intense and sustained reflection, even angst, that you find in ethnography about telling a story that isn't yours. This is something quite profound and unique. Everyone steals stories, absolutely everyone, except us. Or rather, we steal them too, but we feel rotten about it. I have come to think that what ethnographers do best is worry about why a story came into their hands in the first place. This worry precedes ethnography; it is what gives our pursuit humility and earnestness and hope.

Ethnography should go everywhere ethnographers want it to go but never with too much confidence. We must keep our heads a little bowed. Greatness eludes us. It is our loss of nerve that makes us ethnographers. That and our need, our irrepressible need, to go to real places to find the lost home of our imaginations.

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