

## Believing in Anthropology as Literature

Ruth Behar

*When I sit down to make my stories I know very well that I want to take the reader by the throat, break her heart, and heal it again. With that intention I cannot sort out myself, say this part is for the theorist, this for the poet, this for the editor, and this for the wayward ethnographer who wants to document my experience.*

Dorothy Allison, "Believing in Literature"

My editor asks me gently, she knows I might take offense.

"Would you consider allowing us to omit that line from the blurb, where it says your book is a work of cultural anthropology?" Trying to reassure me, she adds, "The rest of the blurb is wonderful. We'll use it prominently on the back cover. But since we're marketing the book as a trade book, we need to reach the general reader, and any reference to an academic discipline is a turn-off. They say it's toxic. They've done studies. I strongly advise we make the cut."

Mind you, my book is being published in a small edition by a university press, not in industrial quantities by a commercial publisher. You won't find it for sale at Wal-Mart. But these days even university presses keep a nervous eye on the bottom line, especially when they're trying to market a book that's about a somewhat sexy topic. My new book, *An Island Called Home* (2007), is about Cuba. And Jews. The combination is exotic enough that it might attract some interest beyond the academy. That is why my editor would have me forgo the gorgeous line of endorsement that makes me absolutely ecstatic, the line that describes my book as "cultural anthropology that rises to the level of great literature."

This blurb makes me happy because I've been telling students for years that the writing we do as cultural anthropologists, what we call "ethnography," is a form of literature, a unique variety of "creative non-fiction" that has yet to be taught in Master of Fine Arts programs. At the same

time, I've let them know about the huge fear of good writing in anthropology – the assumption being that good writing has a scary tendency to be precious, to be too full of itself, to be self-indulgent (always a no-no in anthropology), to be a distraction from the pressing reality at hand that needs to be analyzed rigorously and unselfishly. It is as if a stringent work ethic got established in anthropology from its earliest days, disdaining the idea that ethnography as a literary form could be a source of pleasure. Good writing became associated with frilliness, with caviar, champagne, and dark chocolate truffles. The mission of ethnography required that we sacrifice such bourgeois privileges and get down and dirty with the natives. A certain moral righteousness ordained that we not spotlight the ethnographer carrying out the work, but rather those heroic people at the margins of history and capitalist development who could be assisted in their quest for cultural survival through our attention, activism, and publications. Ethnographic writing had to be as pure, unadorned, and unscented as Ivory soap, and go in and get the job done.

Even with such restrictions, there have always been ethnographers who have shone as writers and whose artistic longings have poignantly risen above our second-fiddle genre. I've also been telling students that we need to take our writing seriously and learn the art of ethnography from the master writers in our field – among them Ruth Benedict, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Barbara Myerhoff, John Gwaltney, and Clifford Geertz. It was Clifford Geertz (2000) who characterized ethnographic writing as "thick description" and famously portrayed the Balinese cockfight in ornate language that laid out its fictions and metaphors, not to mention its complex politics.

Geertz was admirably talented, prolific, and creative. But he didn't exist in a vacuum. He couldn't have done the work he did if there hadn't been a tribe of writers disguised as anthropologists who, like him, had found ways to reinvent the genre of ethnography by brilliantly mixing together travel stories, memoirs, biographic vignettes, and cultural analysis, all in the service of creating vivid accounts rooted in fieldwork, the rite of passage which consists in spending stretches of time interacting with other people to learn how they find meaning in the world.

Some members of this tribe of writers have traveled far away, as did Claude Lévi-Strauss (1992), who went into the jungle regions of Brazil and wrote with deep existentialist angst about the "sad tropics." Others returned home, as did Zora Neale Hurston (1990), going back to Eatonville, Florida, to examine her own town through what she called the "spy glass" of anthropology. The destination isn't what makes their writing sparkle. It's the way these authors ponder the question of how people think about

belonging *someplace*. It's the detail and sensuality with which they evoke an elusive *beingthereness*. It's the degree of honesty and fearlessness they bring to their meditations on the purpose of their own journeys.

Aware of this history that precedes me in anthropology, I proudly say to my editor, "My book is a work of cultural anthropology. Why should I hide it?"

And she, "You're going to scare away readers. They're going to think it's a textbook, the usual standard fare in anthropology. Boring stuff."

Now what I feel is shame. I feel exposed, shorn of a great and wonderful illusion, like the emperor finding out the truth about his new clothes.

Forget what I've been telling students for years. What I've been telling them is a fancier version of what I've been telling myself. As a young woman I'd wanted to be a writer, but I became a cultural anthropologist. Anthropology seduced me. I was a child-immigrant from Cuba and irresistibly drawn to the topics that anthropology adores – identity, culture, displacement. How could I not be enamored of the passport that anthropology gave me to travel, to spend long periods of time abroad in Spanish-speaking countries, including back in Cuba, as a voluntary exile? I figured I'd find my way as a writer eventually by studying anthropology.

It's taken a while, but I tell myself I *am* a writer. I do cultural anthropology *as a writer*. I feel I'm part of an anthropological tribe of wannabe writers, some of them heartbroken, some of them not. Clifford Geertz's early ambition was to be a novelist, but he gave up the dream for anthropology and wrote in a marvelously witty *New-Yorkerish* voice as an anthropologist. I don't think he had any regrets. Ruth Benedict penned poems that were so clichéd they're best allowed to retreat into oblivion, but she wrote with memorable lyricism about Native American Pueblo cultures. I think she did have regrets about giving up poetry; she felt so uncomfortable about also wanting to be a poet that she published her poems under the pseudonyms Ruth Stanhope and Anne Singleton.<sup>1</sup> Only a handful of anthropologists have gained distinction as anthropologists and creative artists, most notably Zora Neale Hurston. For the most part, I believe it is repressed, or sublimated, artistic longing that feeds the creative spirit in anthropology.

By wanting to scratch out the line that tied me to my chosen field, my editor reminded me of a reality I hadn't wanted to face: no matter how hard I might try to turn cultural anthropology into literature, the majority of people out there, including some very well-educated folks, aren't going to see things the way I do. For these potential readers, to say you're a cultural anthropologist is a *turn-off*, or at best an invitation to a conversation

in which they ask, *Oh, so what have you dug up lately?* and in which you try to let them know you're not Indiana Jones. *No, I don't go digging for bones or pots or ancient civilizations, I simply talk to people and write about how they see the world.* Before you've finished your tale, your companion's eyes are glazing over with boredom.

For better or for worse, my kind editor doesn't want to hurt my feelings. She's given up trying to convince me to erase the line about my book being a work of cultural anthropology. It's going to be printed on the back cover. Call me naive, call me a hapless dreamer, but I'm going to cling to that line, which tells me my efforts haven't been in vain, that the decision I made long ago wasn't totally foolish. I'm going to cling to that line because it lets others know I come to my writing via cultural anthropology. Whether they like it or not, I found my voice slowly, painfully, writing my way into and out of anthropology. That's the truth. It would be a lie to pretend otherwise.

Like Dorothy Allison, who studied anthropology in New York before giving it up to become a fiction writer, I too want "to take the reader by the throat, break her heart, and heal it again" (1994: 180). I too believe in literature, believe in the power of the written word to do good work in the world. And through my work, I've been trying to make myself and others believe that anthropology can also be a way of doing literature.

So I am delighted, at least initially, when I receive an email message from a Latino anthropology student in New York, who writes, "After reading your book, *The Vulnerable Observer* [1996] you have given me a greater appreciation for all the sacrifices that my mother and many other Latinas have made for their families. You have greatly inspired me, as a Latino, and I know that once my sister reads your book, she will also be inspired." He then goes on to say, "I was confused about whether or not anthropology was to be my road. I had doubts that I would be an effective anthropologist since the gringos dominate the field. Yet after reading your book . . . and reading more on indigenous anthropologists and historians . . . I have realized that this is my destiny." He thanks me and signs himself "a brother of Colombian background."

When I get messages like this, I am amazed that a complete stranger has found something in my writing that speaks to him. I had not envisioned a young man, a young Latino, as a reader of my book. I am extremely moved that he took the trouble to look me up and write me warm words of praise and solidarity.

At the same time, I worry. My readers frequently seem to find things in my writing that I didn't know I had put there. I try to think, in this case,

<sup>1</sup> I discuss Ruth Benedict's poetry in Behar 2008.

about what exactly I said in my book that would have led my reader to be grateful for the sacrifices his mother and other Latinas have made for their families. I mean, I don't mind that this is a message he took away, but as far as I can remember, I never discussed specifically the issue of Latina self-sacrifice in my book. So I worry about how it is that meanings, even meanings we approve of, get inscribed in our texts independently of our will as writers.

But this is not the only or even the main reason I worry. I worry for yet another reason. What worries me more is that something I have written has inspired another person to want to enter the field of anthropology. I know it is heretical to say this. After all, it would seem that the aim of anthropologists, who seek to write books that readers will want to pull off the shelf, should be to entice would-be disciples to join our discipline. But I worry, I worry sincerely, about the burden of responsibility I feel when I am told I have inspired someone to pursue anthropology. I worry because I do not consider my work to be representative of what most anthropologists consider anthropology. I worry about my lack of a sense of authority in this discipline where I reside, still uncertainly, often disloyally, and sometimes, I feel, illegally. Who am I to dare to lead others into my anthropology? What if my anthropology is a flimsy raft that won't deliver my trusting reader to a safe harbor? What if my reader, depending on me, doesn't make it to the other side?

I worry because I know that even though anthropology has changed in the last few decades – changed to the point where some of us can say out loud, as Virginia Domínguez (2000: 361–93) recently has, that what we need to pursue in anthropology is a “politics of love and rescue” – it really has not changed all that much, not enough yet. I don't tell my Latino reader this, but I think to myself that maybe he was right to be apprehensive about the gringos who dominate the field. Most efforts to bring emotions and feelings, including love and gratitude, into our work are likely to be dismissed as “feminine sentimentality.”

I worry that my published words are too utopian, that they will not protect my reader from the sharks and stormy currents that lie ahead. I worry that I have shooed away his quite legitimate fears, which he ought to continue to take seriously, so he will be ready to swim, or at least, float, if the raft he has found in my words gets torn apart in midstream.

It is not just this lone Latino reader I seem to have encouraged to join me on my humble raft. Messages keep arriving, usually via email, like secret notes in bottles thrown to the sea, the messengers unsure whether I will receive, let alone reply to their request for . . . well, for what exactly? I think what they're requesting of me, those readers who write to me, is simply

that I acknowledge and support their desire to be the kind of vulnerable observers they wish to be.

Let me cite two other email messages regarding *The Vulnerable Observer* that came to me from women readers. One reader, whom I later met while she was visiting Ann Arbor, wrote, “I know you probably get tons of emails telling you this, but even in the early stage that I am in, it speaks so much to feelings I have about so many things. I am in the process of deciding what career path I am going to take and how much of what I believe corresponds to what anthro is (should be?). For example, I am an African-American woman, I have received Orula and Los Guerreros [Santería deities]. I could never imagine studying my own *ile* [Santería house] and I feel as though I would be invading if I went into another as a ‘scientist.’ I, or at least my ancestors, have been the ‘other’ and I have a really hard time with separating myself from the people/things I want to study. Yet, on the other hand, I want to know and learn and it is personal in the sense that I want something that is very dear to me to be portrayed accurately, not sensationalized.” Another female student of anthropology, who doesn't reveal her background, writes, “I have grappled with the sterility and short-sightedness of Anthropology, so much so that I have seriously considered abandoning it altogether. Thank you for renewing my faith in living and learning as an honest human being. I now feel that I can explore Anthropology without the veil that hinders me both creatively and intellectually. I am greatly looking forward to the progression of the field as you and others with your bravery are acknowledging the multifaceted eye.”

My vulnerable writing produces, or seems to call forth, a vulnerable reader, a reader I am helpless to save, a reader who follows me at his or her own risk. What my vulnerable readers want is to do intellectual work that will not alienate them from themselves or from those whom they seek to understand and eventually write about. In me they feel they have found a guide, even though I have issued a warning in my book to follow me only if they don't mind going places without a map.

But maybe I shouldn't worry so much about my readers. If they've found my writing, if they've taken the time to let me know my writing has meant something to them, they've probably already thrown away their map.

When I think of my own progression as a writer, I believe I have gone from trying to write for my teachers to trying now, in the most recent phase of my work, to write for my mother so I could write for the world.

My mother is the only reader I ever see in my mind when I'm writing. Even though I'm fluent in Spanish, I do most of my writing in English, and my mother's English, even after 45 years in the United States, is still heavily

accented with the Cuban Spanish that is her native tongue. She didn't go to college and never read a book or had intellectual aspirations while I was growing up, but for the past 30 years she's been in an academic environment as an administrator of diplomas at New York University, a job from which she will soon retire. I am very aware that I had to turn away from my mother in order to become the person I became. But I suffer bouts of imposter syndrome. My father made sure I learned to type at the age of ten. Sometimes I fear that I too was only meant to be a secretary.

My mother reads much more now than she used to. She reads the *New York Post* and *Vanidades* and an occasional Danielle Steele novel, but when she hungers for stories, she turns to her favorite *telenovelas* on Spanish television. My writing she will read religiously, the writing I tell her about and show her – I've become more cunning as I've grown older, hiding writing from her that is too revealing about our family and that I know she won't like, or writing that is too revealing of my feelings and divulges secrets I'd rather she didn't know. For example, I hope she won't read this. I certainly don't plan on showing it to her. Not that there's anything here that would offend her. I just need to know that I'm writing something she could read, but won't read. How absurd this must seem. Writing remains so fraught for me. It is fraught with the desire to please my mother and my shame about my mother and my shame that I'm ashamed. Will my mother be able to read what I write? I hope so and I dread it at the same time.

My first book was my dissertation, *The Presence of the Past in a Spanish Village* (1991). I look back at it now with a mixture of embarrassment and sorrow. Embarrassment because the theoretical perspective was limited, the writing uninspired, and the vision of who might read the book terribly narrow, terribly untrusting of the possibility that anyone beyond the specific field of Spanish village studies would ever want to read the book. And sorrow because I knew much more than I was capable of writing at the time about the people who shared their lives with me, and now it is too late to tell those stories; they are gone, and the anthropologist I was then, the anthropologist who heard those stories and could have told those stories, is also gone.

The odd thing was I thought I was writing for my teachers, but in fact I was writing for an image, a mirage, of what I assumed to be proper academic work, as I see my own students doing now. I recall my teacher James Fernandez candidly saying to me, when I turned in my dissertation, that he had expected me to produce something much more literary, something much less canonical. I had his permission to do the creative writing I so much wanted to do, but the weight of the academy bore down on my shoulders. I wrote a book that, as far as I'm concerned, failed me and failed

my informants. But this book got me tenure in anthropology at the University of Michigan. It was the only book I'd written when I was blessed to receive the MacArthur Foundation "genius" award.

As I was contemplating how to write about the experiences I'd had in Spain, I read John Berger's *Pig Earth* (1992) and loved it, loved the way it reached deep into the everyday mud, wine, cows, sheep, and desire of European peasants. But to have written a book like Berger's required a degree of courage, security, and self-confidence, not to mention writing skill, I did not yet have. I was trying then to find my voice in and through academic anthropology, for which Berger's book wasn't an acceptable model.

By the time I was ready to write my second book, *Translated Woman* (1993), I knew that I didn't want to repeat the mistake of writing a book that disappointed me. I wanted to produce a book that took more risks, a book that didn't seek approval, a book that was naughty, a book that would be rigorous, feminist, engaged with issues of anthropological storytelling, while at the same time being emotionally compelling. And yet with this book as with my first, I knew at the time that there were options that would have made the book more accessible to a wider audience, and that, more importantly, would have plumbed its literary potential, and again I didn't pursue those options out of fear of rupturing my ties to the academic world.

One of the first readers of an early draft of my manuscript was the writer Sandra Cisneros and she suggested I take Esperanza's stories and completely reshape them, mixing and matching sentences from here and from there in her narrative, blending Esperanza's stories with my own fictional elaborations, and creating my own version of her tale in the style of a testimonial novel. At the time I couldn't follow this suggestion, tempting though it was. I felt I had recorded a life history in a certain order and in a certain voice and in a particular historical moment and that it was important to maintain its integrity as far as possible, even if Esperanza's story was going to have to be highly edited in order to be readable as a book.

While I couldn't turn Esperanza's story into a novel, the strategy I finally used combined a novelistic and a scholarly voice. The book begins with Esperanza telling her story with few interruptions from me. Only the categories of "rage" and "redemption," which I used to structure her story, reveal my presence as a storyteller. I kept Esperanza's story in the order she told it to me and added no fictional elaborations. But I did edit her words to highlight the dramatic punch of her story. This part of the book, readers tell me, does read like a novel. It is the part of the book, certainly, that my mother enjoyed most. The book then proceeds to an account of

my relationship with Esperanza. There I explore her life as a marketing woman and the comical way in which I traipsed after her during her trips to the city to sell fruits and vegetables from her plastic buckets. In the last section, I move to a series of feminist, historical, and autobiographical interpretations of her story. I wrote this section knowing I wanted *Translated Woman* to be read and discussed in the academy.

I am sure my mother skipped over most of my interpretive ruminations, with the exception of the concluding autobiographical chapter of the book, "The Biography in the Shadow," which addressed the clashes I'd had with my father in wanting to become an intellectual, and pained her and my father in ways that I came later to regret. In that chapter, which some readers love and others detest, I explored the wrenching process by which I came to be an educated, privileged woman scripting Esperanza's story into my book. It was a mere 20 pages, but this chapter proved to be the most controversial part of the book. In Deborah Gordon's eloquent words, it was there that I dared to address "the difficult position of women in the academy who reap the rewards and still want to criticize the very system that has rewarded them so generously."

Both *Translated Woman* (1993) and later *The Vulnerable Observer* (1996), a collection of personal essays about my ethnographic experiences in Spain, Cuba, and the United States, are books I think of as having one foot in the academy and one foot outside. They are located uneasily between the world of scholarship and the world of creative non-fiction, not entirely satisfying the requirements of either, yet hoping for joint citizenship in both.

When I think about my basic criterion – will my mother be able to read what I write? – I realize I didn't fulfill my goal in these books. Although they're largely devoid of jargon and other forms of exclusionary writing, they were still written for my teachers, in other words, responding to the internalized presence and pressure of the academy, even now that I am a teacher myself and should feel more free to change the rules. Thinking of myself as writing for my mother has allowed me to move my writing beyond what was permissible in the academy. But it isn't easy to balance for long periods of time on the one foot that's standing shakily outside the door of the university that provides my bread and butter.

When I was a young woman, I wasn't confident enough to call myself a writer. That felt too presumptuous. But I could say I was an anthropologist who wrote. The writing was being done for a higher purpose – to elucidate the stories of those who didn't have access to the written word and to publishing. This made it possible for me to write. I was a scribe, putting

down on paper other people's stories for posterity. It was only as I grew older and more confident that I started wanting to be a writer who also put her own story into the text of other people's stories. I was ready to stand on my own two feet. Without the crutches that anthropology had given me when I was wobbly.

More and more, I dare to think I can call myself a writer, plain and simple. But I can't forget that I took up the pen for the same reason all anthropologists do: because we care passionately about the worlds that others inhabit and not just about our own small worlds. Of course, writers of literature claim to feel the same way, even without obtaining degrees in anthropology. The difference is that anthropologists would be booed out of the discipline if any of us attempted to do what Nathan Englander just did in his new novel, *The Ministry of Special Cases* (2007), which is set in Argentina – spend ten years writing about a place he only visited once for a weekend before beginning the writing. To be taken seriously, anthropologists must visit the places they write about, not once, but over and over. Our imaginations are in service to real communities we know firsthand and to real journeys we've taken across land and sea. And this isn't a bad thing at all, so long as we know how to spin a tale about all that we've witnessed.

I know I have said that ethnography at its best is just another form of creative non-fiction, but I still often think that one day I will have to stop being an anthropologist in order to write stories that can truly be called literature. For reasons I myself don't fully understand, I keep putting off that day. I guess anthropology continues to seduce me. Or maybe, like a turtle, I've created an anthropology that I can carry on my back, an anthropology that I can live in and also hide within. At the same time, I feel that I have yet to do the writing I was put on this earth to do. Maybe that sounds pessimistic, but I feel it's optimistic. Knowing I still have more writing to do keeps me going, keeps me returning yet again to the blank page.

I would love to believe that my latest effort at writing as a cultural anthropologist "rises to the level of great literature." I know it doesn't. I wish it did. Still, I'm grateful for this generous overstatement that will be on the back cover of my book. Thanks to my editor's warning, I'm prepared to lose numerous potential readers, who will return the book to the shelf as soon as they see it's a work of cultural anthropology. But I pray there will be some readers who will take the book off the shelf and try to imagine for a moment, along with me, that anthropology has all the potential to inspire a story that takes you by the throat and won't let you go, a story perhaps worthy of being placed on that mighty pedestal we call literature.

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## III

# Receptions