

# What Renato Rosaldo Gave Us

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No other book was so inspiring to me as *Culture and Truth* when I was starting out as an intimidated professor and fledgling ethnographer. Inspiration doesn't capture the full impact that Renato's work had on me. I never took a class with him, but I thought of Renato as one of my teachers. I needed his wisdom. I needed his courage. There were places I wanted to go to as an ethnographer, a teacher, and a writer, but I wasn't sure I would make it. Renato's work taught me how to navigate between fieldwork, anthropology, and the academy.

Renato gave us a new map. It was a map of our postcolonial, nostalgia-saturated world. And it was a map of our haunted global souls. A map, too, of a different kind of academy, where diversity and inclusiveness might become real living truths and not mere slogans. An academy where our hearts didn't have to be checked at the gate as if they were a danger to institutions of higher learning.

*Culture and Truth* opened my eyes to the borders and border guards that had sprung up all over the terrain of our supposedly open society. With my eyes open, and holding Renato's map in my hands, I dared to cross different borders—geographic, intellectual, emotional, compositional—sometimes provoking the fury of the border guards. Thanks to Renato, I understood the reasons for their fury and was only a little bit scared of the guards.

To this day, *Culture and Truth* continues to wow me with each rereading. Year after year, I have the opportunity to read it anew with a fresh crop of students in my seminars on blurred genres and ethnographic writing. It is always a revelation to discuss such concepts as "the positioned subject," "imperialist nostalgia," and "borderland narratives." These concepts are so integral a part of contemporary anthropology that our discipline is inconceivable without them.

The first edition of *Culture and Truth* appeared in 1989, the year the Berlin Wall collapsed and a new era of post-utopian thinking and expanded global capitalism came into being. It was the most significant, and I believe the only, book within anthropology that spoke directly to the changing sensibility of the time. Renato's dismantling of classic norms in anthropology and his gentle but firm urging that we move toward approaches centered in narrative and subjectivity were exactly the "remaking of social analysis" that many of us were blindly searching for, but didn't know how to articulate until Renato did so. He wrote out the agenda for our post-Wall, border-crossing anthropology with such clarity and such ease, and most of all with such grace, that some people (as rumor had it) thought he was saying the obvious, not realizing it was obvious because Renato managed to say what needed saying unhampered by jargon, without flaunting the depth of his knowledge, speaking so everyone could understand.

"Grief and a Headhunter's Rage," the essay that became the introduction to *Culture and Truth*, was presented and published about six years before the book appeared. I wasn't there when Renato read it at a meeting of the American Ethnological Society. I was a graduate student then. One of my professors said that its effect was like a tidal wave, startling, stunning, ripping up the ground below everyone's feet, lifting the assembled crowd of ethnographers from the complacency that had become established in the profession.

For me, there was such an aura surrounding this essay that when I finally read it I held my breath as I turned the pages. After I finished reading, I realized that what was so radical about it wasn't simply that Renato included, within an ethnographic argument delivered to an academic audience, the account of a tragic personal loss—the death of his wife Michelle Rosaldo. To speak in a personal voice and mourn publicly hadn't been attempted before by an ethnographer in an academic setting. But the more radical act was Renato's insistence that his ethnographic work on Ilongot

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headhunting had gained a level of intellectual depth and understanding by drawing upon the force of emotions he'd experienced as a result of his profound grief. Anthropologists had always claimed a kind of X-ray vision that somehow gave them total knowledge and total access to the symbolic structures and social practices of their informants. Here was Renato admitting that until he experienced for himself the rage in grief, he had failed to grasp the weight of the words he'd recorded from his Ilongot subjects about what it meant to them to engage in headhunting.

What a surprise! To find an anthropologist who didn't set forth what he knew in self-serving arrogant heroics, but who instead told us what he didn't know, what he didn't comprehend. Told us with an honesty and humility that was unheard of. He made his incomprehension of Ilongot culture the focus of his analysis. It had taken him fourteen years to "get it." Getting it had involved the painful emotional work of staring into the void of our mortality and embracing the uncertainty of human existence.

Renato told a truth that hadn't been told in anthropology: that to know we must also feel. If our hearts are frozen, our ethnographies will be dormant, like Sleeping Beauty, shut away from the world, waiting for the magic kiss to awaken.

Literal-minded readers might misunderstand Renato's message and think he is calling for an exact tit-for-tat empathetic relationship. Loss for loss, grief for grief. But this is not his point at all. His argument is that social analysis depends on multidimensional knowing. As Renato puts it, with his characteristic elegance, "The process of knowing involves the whole self" (1993, 181). Commenting on *Never in Anger* by Jean Briggs (1971), he suggests that what made her ethnography so intellectually compelling was her ability to use "her own feelings as sources of insight" (Rosaldo 1993, 176). Again, there are those who will misunderstand, who will believe, foolishly, that Renato is calling for "touchy-feely" work or for a return to Victorian sentimentality. It is emotional intelligence he seeks, which has been in short supply in ethnographic writing and in academic work generally, and this requires that we be able to imagine new subjects of analysis (216–17).

Once Renato points it out, we can see for ourselves the shocking manner in which anthropologists used objectivist forms of perception and writing to gain legitimacy for our discipline, but at the cost of dehumanizing those whom they were seeking to describe in their ethnographies. One example can stand in for many: that of the anthropologist observing family members at a funeral in West Africa, who in their grief try to kill

themselves and are held back by members of their community. Convinced that his proper attitude should be that of the detached observer quantifying results, the anthropologist makes a list of those who are “tied by hide” and those who are held back by a “string tied around the ankle.” The result, as Renato notes, is that “the violent upheaval of grief, its wailing and attempts at self-injury and suicide,” becomes a spectacle (57).

Ultimately, Renato is asking us not only to rethink how we tell our ethnographic stories, but to consider something even more crucial: what counts as knowledge—how we know, what we know, why we know. What he offers us is an epistemology that transforms the Cartesian foundation of Western thought, “I think, therefore I am,” into “I feel, therefore I think.”

“Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage” introduces the book, acting as the ice pick to pry anthropology out of its deep freeze. From there, the book moves on in nine essays that offer a subtle musicality as they critique, reorient, and renew the discipline. Renato shows us by example how to speak in a range of feeling tones that encompass loss, sadness, and desperation, as well as hope, joy, humor, irony, parody, and creative playfulness. He frequently takes on the role of the trickster, so we can see how silly we are when we take ourselves too seriously and forget that our analytical concepts are social constructs. As a trickster, he even shows us how our behavior in our everyday academic lives is ritually prescribed and worthy of ethnographic commentary. One of my favorite humorous moments in *Culture and Truth* is the description of the “busy-ness ethic,” in which, as Renato describes it, “One friend says to another, for example, ‘Let’s get together and talk,’ whereupon the two of them deploy an obligatory gesture worthy of Radcliffe-Brown’s Andaman Islanders: they pull out their appointment calendars.” Renato continues, “When the appointed hour on the appointed day arrives, they greet one another breathlessly, converse for a while, and excuse themselves, saying they’re already late for an important meeting.” He concludes this vignette by being wonderfully tongue-in-check and unflinchingly accurate: “Woe to those who simply do their jobs without subscribing to the self-aggrandizing, meaning-giving ‘busy-ness ethic.’ Neither their colleagues nor their deans will take them seriously” (172).

Humor and humility are always perfectly balanced in Renato’s work. What Latina/Latino readers are able to see in his writing that others sometimes miss is the absence of a sense of entitlement. Making it into anthropology, making it into the academy, is never taken for granted, and once in, the otherness of these spaces and the often alienating discourses

that flourish within them don't escape Renato's notice as a Chicano observer. This involves a fundamental acceptance of his borderland position, being torn between centers and margins, sites of power and sites of powerlessness, one foot poised before the Roman columns of the museum, and the other planted inside the broken cement floor of the garage sale, one hand grasping Weber, Turner, and Geertz, the other clinging to Fanon, Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Ann Landers. The high/low aesthetic Renato champions isn't an erasure of core values, as some critics have feared. It is about questioning prestige hierarchies to understand how they've been created and maintained. It is about seeking forms of intellectual and artistic *mestizaje* that allow for a wide spectrum of cultures, peoples, places, objects, ideas, dreams, and desires to intersect and create dialogues, encounters, fusions, and identities.

Unlike other male anthropologists of his generation, Renato engages with various forms of feminist thinking and comments thoughtfully on the work of women ethnographers and women writers. Allusions to the contributions of women abound throughout *Culture and Truth*. Whether responding to the nuances of Dorinne Kondo's uneasiness about doing fieldwork in Japan as an inauthentic native, or exploring how Sandra Cisneros has transformed the warrior hero of the Mexican corrido into a multiplex personal identity, Renato strives to challenge the "manly" Weberian ethic that constrained anthropology and imposed a single-minded attitude of dominance and emotional self-control as the condition for pursuing knowledge. Renato urges scholars—both female and male—to delve instead into "unmanly states," such as "rage, feebleness, frustration, depression, embarrassment, and passion," to open up analytical possibilities that the classic pose of detachment cannot even envision (172).

I know that for me, the pride of place Renato gave to women's intellectual work, and his brave dismantling of the classic model of the anthropologist as male hero (safari outfit optional, but highly recommended), were both hugely important for my thinking. Renato gave me the courage to explore the emotional tensions in my relationship with my *comadre* Esperanza in *Translated Woman* (Behar 1993) and the intellectual tools to perceive the rage and redemption that informed Esperanza's view of her own life story. It was Renato who taught me to see that Esperanza was interrogating me as much as I was interrogating her.

Renato's legitimation of women's work and his critical reading of the Western literary canon and anthropology's discomfort with multiculturalism also moved me to unearth forgotten intellectual genealogies in *Women*

*Writing Culture* (Behar and Gordon 1995). Thanks to his example, I came to see the urgency of bringing the voices of minority women into the center of anthropology and encouraging scholarship that merges art, ethnography, and cultural criticism.

I believe that feminist ethnography, from the early 1990s to the present, owes a major debt to Renato's *Culture and Truth*, as does Latina/Latino ethnography, for the permission to go back to our diasporic homelands and serve as a translator between the voices of our communities and the voices of the academy. I went on to do more work in Cuba, creating bridges between Cuban thinkers on and off the island, and later examining my own search for identity in the Jewish community as a Cuban American who was able to return because I had an "anthropological passport" (Behar 1995, 2007). These projects were made possible because Renato offered a vision of self-reflexivity that wasn't solipsistic but deeply conscious of social responsibility. But his contribution went much further. The opening of our canon to a broad spectrum of ethnographic visions was hugely beneficial to anthropology in general. Emotion, social commitment, political engagement—all the things classical anthropology taught us to suppress—are now the bedrock of our discipline as a result of Renato's work.

Renato wrote *Culture and Truth* before he became an *antropoeta*, before experiencing the stroke that led him to be an anthropologist who writes poetry, a poet who writes anthropology, following in the tradition of such illustrious predecessors as Ruth Benedict (Behar 2008). Terrible grief led Renato to envision a new poetics for anthropology, and then physical loss led him to birth the poet within. But I think the poet was already being gestated in *Culture and Truth*.

The writing in *Culture and Truth* is a unique mix of ethnographic storytelling, critical rereadings of theoretical and anthropological texts, and autobiographic revelation. It is written as prose, to be sure, but one can detect early signs that the light of poetry was beginning to illuminate his approach: the emphasis that Renato places on the role of improvisation (life is what happens when you're making other plans), his crisscrossing of ethnographic and literary analysis, his insistence that one's heart must be in one's work for the work to matter. His concern that we forge new languages for speaking and writing about culture—languages that are intimate and compassionate and aware of mutually interrogating gazes—is the concern of a poet who suffers when words are used to distort and mangle the truth. His need to see the beauty of unexplored possibilities in the field, in the classroom, and in ethnographic texts is the wisdom of the poet who

doesn't try to contrive the truth, because being present in every moment is truth enough.

Renato transformed anthropology into a home where more of us can think and create. I'm pretty sure I'd be homeless without his work. If not for *Culture and Truth*, I'd be that traveler who arrives at the port where no one is waiting.

Thank you, Renato, for being there to help me cross over.

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