Dare we say 'I'? Bringing the personal into scholarship

By Ruth Behar

The other day, I ran into an African-American doctoral student who announced with delight that he'd just been offered a job at a small liberal-arts college in the Midwest, not far from where he grew up. The job was perfect, he said. He'd be near his 85-year-old grandfather, a man of strength and independence who had built his house with his own hands. The student was looking forward to carrying out a project that he'd long been dreaming of—interviewing his grandfather at length and using his recollections to tell the story of the great migration of emancipated slaves from the South to the Midwest.

I was not surprised to hear of this student's desire to do research that would weave together a deeply personal story and a sweeping historical narrative. Everywhere I turn these days, I meet people who are searching for meaningful and intelligent ways to bring personal stories into their scholarship. Fifteen years ago, when I was a graduate student in anthropology, such projects were permissible, at best, as diversions, to be pursued only after completing a full-blown scholarly project and obtaining proper credentials. To want to begin one's academic career with the life story of one's grandfather would have been unthinkable. Indeed, even now, it is just barely acceptable. The student whom I mentioned did highly original, yet far less personal, field research in the Caribbean as the basis for his dissertation.

But things are changing. The recent movement to recognize the autobiographical voice as a legitimate way of speaking in academia is gaining many of us permission to imagine a range of complex, daring, and compelling projects. In anthropology, the last decade of intense meditation on the meaning of "native anthropology"—in which scholars claim a personal connection to the places in which they work—has opened up an important debate on what it means to be an insider in a culture.

Anthropology's dilemma has always been to understand the "native" point of view without actually "going native." As people who are not "the natives," we are sometimes considered outsiders and our ideas are dismissed as "anthropological." But even the "natives" have been shown to be elsewhere, often thinking of their own communities and na...
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Laughable. They charge that all the variants of personal writing that have blossomed in the last few decades are serving and superficial, full of unnecessary guilt or excessive bravado. Daphne Patai, a professor of women's studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, recently dismissed such writing as evidence of a "newfangled solipsism." (The Chronicle, Point of View, February 23, 1994).

I don't think it was solipsism that led Virginia Woolf to start A Room of One's Own. Her reflections about women's writing, with a parable about a bundle who remarried her husband after her British university by telling her to walk on the gravel and not on the turf. I don't think it was solipsism that led Zora Neale Hurston to start Mules and Men. Her study of African-American folklore in her hometown, with an acknowledgment of her own strange position as an African American wearing "the skyglass of an anthropologist." Nor do I think it was solipsism that led James Agee to include in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men troubled meditations about his fear of frustrating the lives of white Southern tenant farmers in the very account in which he was being, respectfully, to describe the contours of those lives.

Now hailed as classics, these three works written more than a half-century ago pushed at the borders between autobiography and ethnography and created new ways of thinking about the world and how we know it in the process. Woolf, Hurston, and Agee all used a readily personal voice to lead the reader not into bubbles of self-absorption but into the enormous sea of serious social issues. It is the legacy left by such modernist writers that is being explored in recent writing by scholars who are mixing personal and analytical reflections to produce new hybrid forms of expression.

Some objects to autobiography, as such, as a genre in its own right. What bothers critics is the insertion of personal stories into what we have been taught to think of as the analysis of impersonal facts. Throughout most of the 20th century, in scholarly fields ranging from literary criticism to anthropology to law, the reigning paradigms have called for distance, objectivity, and abstraction. The worst sin has been to be "too personal." But if you're an African-American legal scholar writing about the history of contract law and you discover, as Patricia Williams recounts in her book The Alchemy of Race and Rights (Harvard University Press, 1991), the deed of sale of your own great-grandmother to a white lawyer, that better knowledge certainly gives "the facts" another twist of urgency and poignancy. It undercuts the notion of a contract as a private, impersonal legal document, challenging us to think about the universality of law and the pursuit of justice for all.

Personal evidence is evidence. That is one of Ms. Williams's key contributions to scholarship. It is ironic that much of the academic world is uncomfortable with the idea of scholars' including personal quests and questions in their work, when ours is an age in which truth exists largely in the form of personal testimony.

We are continually confronted with the testimonies of survivors—of war, torture, rape, and genocide. In I. Rigoberta Menchú's, An Indian Woman in Guatemala, the author's personal testimony forces the students on a personal quest and ultimately produces a redrawn map of social terrain.

What is the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo points out in Culture and Truth (Beacon Press, 1989), such distancing is clearly absurd in daily usage: We don't say "month rites" to refer to the practice of menstrual blood. Our teeth are not just weak; they are seriously dis- torsed reality. When scholars depict working-class lives as stuck in a "culture of poverty," it is not to mean an inaccurate and racist stereotype; they can have meaning effects on debates over policy on subjects ranging from the North American Free Trade Agreement to immigration to welfare reform.

Obviously, personal writing isn't a cure for all the inadequacies of scholarship. And, as with any new paradigm, the crite- ria for evaluating personal writing are fuzzy and uncertain. It is naive to think that, after years of being taught to con- struct detached voice, we will suddenly be able not only to write moving first-person narratives, but also to appreciate such narratives when we come across them. To be able to write skillfully in a personal voice takes training and practice. The next generation of students, having read and criticized our first furtive efforts at writing ourselves back into our scholarly work, will do better.

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