

Section 2

June 29, 1994



II VERSO, "DEATH AND THE THEOLOGIAN" FROM "THE DANSE MACABRE OF WOMEN"

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TED BENSON FOR THE CHRONICLE

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-fledged 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 academe is giving 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 used to be "the natives" have become scholars in their own right, often studying their home communities and na-

tions, the lines between participant and observer, friend and stranger, aboriginal and alien are no longer drawn so easily.

At my institution, the University of Michigan, a Greek-American anthropology student is pursuing research in her father's native village on the relationship between homelands and the people who have left them. She does not assume that she has a "natural" connection to her father's place of birth, but rather questions her own nostalgia for it, defining the word in the Greek way as *nostos* (homecoming) and *algia* (pain).

Another Michigan student, born in Belgium and educated in the United States, plans to use his fluency in French to work with black Caribbean immigrants in Paris. He wants to get a fresh look at the historic metropolitan center of French philosophy and culture (which he has been taught to admire) through the eyes of formerly colonized subjects.

As increasing numbers of students choose to explore this type of work, we scholars who are writing autobiographically need to be able to articulate clearly—for their sake and ours—the philosophy behind the practice of personally engaged scholarship. Philosophy? For some of my academic colleagues, this proposition is

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Bringing the Autobiographical Voice Into Scholarship

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laughable. They charge that all the variants of personal writing that have blossomed in the last few decades are self-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 "nouveau 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 beadle who reminded her of her second-class position at 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 spy-glass of Anthropology." 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 exploiting the lives of white Southern tenant farmers in the very account in which he was trying, 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 resolutely 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.

Now one 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

who read her life story to confront the merciless destruction of Guatemalan Indian life. Similarly, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a brilliant cartoon epic based on his father's story of how he survived the Holocaust, is among the strongest indictments that we have of the savage history that unfolded in the heart of civilized Europe.

Slowly but surely, the importance of testimony to our contemporary understanding of reality has begun to transform the ancient literary genre of autobiography. I can assert, with confidence, that the best autobiographical scholarly writing sets off

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Press, 1991), the deed of sale of your own great-great-grandmother to a white lawyer, that bitter knowledge certainly gives "the facts" another twist of urgency and poignancy. It undercuts the notion of a contract as an abstract, 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 academy 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: 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. Thus Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (Aunt Lute, 1987) offers reflections on her hybrid cultural heritage as a Chicana living on the borders of several traditions. These thoughts, in turn, stimulate new thinking about the diversity of United States society and culture. Carolyn Kay Steedman, in *Landscape for a Good Woman* (Rutgers University Press, 1987), likewise tells her mother's painful life story of unfulfilled longing for respect, security, and material possessions as a way of challenging the assumption that British working-class people lack a complex psychology.

Of course, as is the case with any intellectual trend, some experiments with including personal experiences work better than others. Writing personally takes as much skill and willingness to follow through on all the nuances of a complicated idea as does writing impersonally. To assert that one is a "white middle-class woman" or a "black gay man" or a "working-class Latina" within one's study, say, of Shakespeare or Santería is interesting only if one is able to draw deeper connections between one's personal experience and the subject under study. That doesn't require a full-length autobiography, but it does require a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world and, more particularly, the topic being studied.

In my own *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border With Esperanza's Story* (Beacon Press, 1993), I related my experience of getting tenure at Michigan within a study that explored the life story of a Mexican street peddler. I did so not to treat our struggles as equivalent but rather to show how different I am from Esperanza, because I had attained the professional position (indeed, not without a struggle) that allowed me to bring her story to this country.

I also reflected on how my background as a Latina affected the university's decision to grant me tenure. Officials first classified me as Latina because of my Cuban roots, then withdrew the identification because of my Jewish roots, and finally designated me a Latina again when they granted me tenure. My experience called into question my ability to depict Esperanza's own mixed identity, on one hand of Indian descent, on the other cut off from much of her Indian heritage by centuries of colo-

rialism. Was my portrait of her as reductionist, shifting, even hurtful as the university's characterization of me had been?

Some critics have taken me to task for the autobiographical closing chapter of *Translated Woman*. And yet I continue to receive letters from women and men who say that my relating my own story made the book whole for them. A Chicana anthropology student in Los Angeles told me that the book's importance to her was twofold: She could see her mother in Esperanza and herself in me. A man in New York wrote: "I was touched by the honesty and courage that I felt it took for you, an academic, to write a book as personal as this one."

What is drawing me and, I believe, other scholars to write personally is a desire to abandon the alienating "metalanguage" that closes, rather than opens, the doors of academe to all those who wish to enter. Personal writing represents a sustained effort to democratize the academy. Indeed, it emerges from the struggles of those traditionally excluded from the academy, such as women and members of minority groups, to find a voice that acknowledges both their sense of difference and their belated arrival on the scholarly scene. "Yes, we are here," so many of the new personal texts seem to assert, "but we're not who you think we are!"

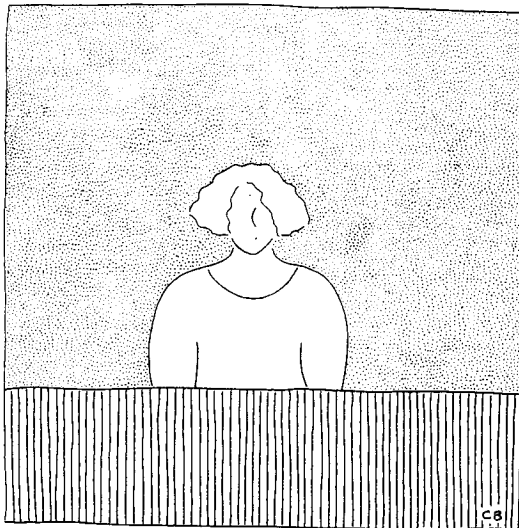
Yet personal writing is not simply a feminist or minority-group pastime. To be able to say "I" in scholarly writing also stems from a wish to speak in plain language that will be understood by a large audience, to say something that resonates more than jargon-laden analyses do with readers. The desire, in all personal writing, ultimately is to engage both the reader's heart and intellect. Call it sentimentality, if you like, but I think a growing number of scholars have become impatient with cold-blooded analysis, which places the observer, and therefore the reader, at a safe, clinical, Mr. Spockian distance from the observed.

AS 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 "mouth rites" to refer to the practice of brushing our teeth. Such terms are not just awkward; they seriously distort reality. When scholars depict working-class Mexicans as stuck in a "culture of poverty" or African-American families as deficient because of their "female-headed households," they play into inaccurate and racist stereotyping that can have damaging effects on debates over policy on subjects ranging from the North American Free Trade Agreement to immigration law to welfare reform.

Obviously, personal writing isn't a cure for all the inadequacies of scholasticism. And, as with any new paradigm, the criteria for evaluating personal writing are still hazy and uncertain. It is naive to think that, after years of being taught to construct arguments in an impersonal, detached voice, we will all suddenly be able not only to write moving first-person narratives, but also to appreciate such narratives when they come our way. 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 faltering efforts at writing ourselves back into our scholarship, will do better.

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AN ACADEMIC MOMENT



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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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