Death and Memory: From Santa María del Monte to Miami Beach

by Ruth Behar

Supplemental Material Comments (0)

From "Death and Memory" (375)

"This paper tells two stories. It is a lament about death, loss, and grief, inscribing my mourning, a double mourning, as an anthropologist and a granddaughter. But it is also about the effort to remember, and the need to remember, my effort and my need to remember, compelled as I am by duty-memory." Postscript, April, 2012

Abstract


The ethnographic work I did in Santa María between the late 1970s and 1980s, and into the early 1990s, has become part of the history of the village, and of the region of León, and of Spain more generally. I was a chronicler of the beliefs and longings of a last generation of peasant farmers, who worked the land through traditional forms of agricultural and community organization. Now, as the descendants of those farmers, living in urban centers in Spain and Europe, look back at their rural roots, there is widespread interest in reconstructing that era.

Much of what I witnessed, including the use of artisanal tools to tend to the land, has become part of the legacy being preserved by the newly built Museo Etnográfico Provincial de León in the nearby village of Mansilla de las Mulas. Who could have predicted that in the span of only a few decades a wide range of living cultural practices would become material things to be displayed on walls and in glass cases in an ethnographic museum?

There is now a website for the village, maintained by Francisco Llamazares, whose grandparents and parents were the first people to welcome me to Santa María when I arrived there at the age of twenty-one to embark on my career as a cultural anthropologist. Beautifully designed, the website is visited frequently by
the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of the people I knew in Santa María, who haven’t lost their sense of connection to their place of origin. More than ever, they long for memories and seek to preserve them using digital media. On my most recent return visit, in the summer of 2011, I brought a jump drive filled with thousands of scanned photographs from my fieldwork. These photographs were devoured with huge excitement, recalling people and events from the past. Several photographs are now on the village website.

About the Author

Ruth Behar is a Jewish Cuban-American anthropologist, poet, and writer who teaches at the University of Michigan. After receiving her B.A. from Wesleyan University in 1977, she studied cultural anthropology at Princeton University. Her dissertation (1983), based on her first fieldwork in northern Spain, became the basis for her first book *The Presence of the Past in a Spanish Village: Santa María del Monte* (1986). She is a noted feminist, and her personal life experiences as a Jewish Cuban-American woman are frequently an important part of her writing. In 1988, she became the first Latin woman to be awarded a MacArthur fellowship "genius grant."

Her second book, *Translated Woman* (1993), was based on ten years of fieldwork in a rural town in Mexico. In 1995 Behar edited (with Deborah Gordon) a feminist response to the landmark book *Writing Culture* titled *Women Writing Culture*. Her controversial book *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (1997) examines the role that the personal can play in ethnographic writing. Since 1991 her research and writing have largely focused on her native country, Cuba, which she left at the age of four. Her research on the dwindling yet vibrant Jewish community in Cuba is the focus of her film *Adio Kerida* (2002), which featured camerawork and editing by her son Gabriel Frye-Behar. Jewish Cuba is also the topic of her latest book, *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba* (2007).

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Interview With the Author

CA: What is the purpose of telling stories? What do stories want?

We tell stories because we’ve had an experience, or witnessed something, or heard someone else tell a story, that’s moved us, gripped us by the throat, left us speechless, made us want to cry and laugh at the same time. Usually, we want immortality for the story, so we tell it, we pass it on, and maybe we even write it down. Stories want to live, to breathe, in our telling of them.
CA: Is ethnography an art? How does taking a writerly approach to ethnography shape knowledge?

I wish ethnography were an art! I don’t think it is yet… but perhaps one day. I’m exaggerating, I know. What I’m trying to say is that ethnography is still a young genre. And beyond that, I think there’s a huge fear of good writing in anthropology—the assumption being that good writing has a tendency to be precious, to be too full of itself, to be self-indulgent (always a no-no in our discipline), to be a distraction from the pressing reality at hand that needs to be analyzed rigorously. 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 in our discipline is associated with frilliness, with caviar and champagne. The mission of ethnography required that we sacrifice such privileges. A certain moral righteousness ordained that we not spotlight the ethnographer carrying out the work, but rather those heroic people at the margins of 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. Despite the dominance of this ethos, there have always been ethnographers who shone as writers, and whose artistic or writerly longings led them to write against the limits of what I’ve called “our second-fiddle genre.” We can learn the art of ethnography from such writerly ethnographies as Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Of Mules and Men*, and Claude Levi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques*, among many others. We have a handful of brilliant writers in our genealogy and many more writer manqués. To be serious writers, we need to read a lot of great fiction and non-fiction. You can only write as well as what you read. So bring Chekhov, Charlotte Bronte, and Jean Rhys with you to the field! Taking a writerly approach to ethnography requires more self-consciousness about language than has traditionally been encouraged in our discipline. In practice, this means taking the time to craft beautiful and supple sentences, one at a time, slowly, painstakingly. It also requires a greater attention to the kinds of stories we are trying to tell—being aware of the rhetorical conventions that we’re using, so that we know, for example, when we’re writing an “arrival scene,” as Mary Louise Pratt showed us in her spectacular essay in *Writing Culture*. Taking a writerly approach has the potential, I think, to make us learn to communicate the knowledge we want to share more lucidly and more movingly, and through that process to question what constitutes knowledge in the first place.

CA: How has writing ethnography changed over the past 25 years?

I would say that there have been two important developments in ethnographic writing in the last 25 years. The first is that there is greater openness toward the use of the personal voice, leading to the creation of the genre we often call “autoethnography.” The personal voice is no longer confined to the introduction and conclusion of most ethnographies, bookending the ethnographer’s presence in carrying out the fieldwork and crafting the work; that voice is more fully woven into the narrative. The second major shift is that “insider” or “diasporic” ethnography has taken off, so that we have a stronger presence of ethnographers with a deep sense of connection to the places and people they write about, whether because of a familial or historical bond or personal memories, which sparks a longing to find home via the passport of anthropology. The classical anthropological focus on “otherness” has taken on a whole new meaning in the works of these ethnographers. Otherness is internalized as the ethnographer seeks out a homecoming that, if not impossible, is always very fraught.

CA: If you were to teach a course on literature and anthropology, what
would your students read?

I already teach such courses at the University of Michigan! These are graduate seminars that have been my signature courses for years. One is called “Blurred Genres: Autobiography, Fiction, Ethnography” and the other is called “Ethnographic Writing.” Students often take both courses, since the first is a reading course and the second is a writing workshop that includes readings about writing. The syllabus for both courses changes each year, but there are some core readings.

In the syllabus for “Blurred Genres,” which focuses on the question of where does the story of the observer end and the story of the observed begin, I frequently include Barbara Myerhoff’s *Number Our Days*, John Gwaltney’s *Drylongso: A Self Portrait of Black America*, and Robert Murphy’s *The Body Silent* as classic texts to begin our discussion. All three books ponder the question of how to use the personal voice in ethnography and come out with starkly different results. I assign Renato Rosaldo’s essay, “Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage,” since I consider it crucial for any discussion of literature and anthropology. This year I also included my own recently published essay, “What Renato Rosaldo Gave Us.” Most significantly, we had the privilege of also reading Renato’s moving poetry manuscript, “The Day of Shelly’s Death,” which he kindly allowed me to share with my students before its publication. I also included as examples of memoir and fiction, Edwidge Danticat’s *Brother, I’m Dying*, and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*, which inspired a discussion on the responsibility of minority writers to act as native ethnographers while also telling compelling stories. I find Daniel Miller’s writing on the stories that things tell to be another example of blurred genres and this year assigned his book, *The Comfort of Things*. I was delighted by the appearance of Kirin Narayan’s *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov*, so I assigned it to my students in “Blurred Genres,” but I expect I will use it more regularly in “Ethnographic Writing.”

In the course on “Ethnographic Writing,” students spend the first few weeks reading a range of texts and writing short exercises based on prompts I provide. The aim is to get everyone thinking about the diverse elements of ethnography, including the point of view of the observer and his/her presence or absence in the text; the challenge of writing about/with/alongside the voices of others; the evocation of a setting; and the dilemmas of moving between storytelling and theorizing. Then in the second half of the course, students have the opportunity to workshop two drafts of their final writing project. The project is based on original research, carried out in any setting that the student chooses, and relying on interactions with people they have gotten to know personally.

To give students inspiration for their writing, I often return to James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which fused Agee’s anguished reflections on being an observer in the rural south during the Depression era with Evans’s restrained black-and-white photographs. I find this text to be a great starting point for discussions about literature and anthropology, and I have students think about how the history of ethnographic writing might have evolved in radically different ways if we’d turned to James Agee as a key ancestor in the formative years of the discipline. I also like to assign Myra Bluebond-Langner’s *The Private Worlds of Dying Children*, where she experimented interestingly with the use of a play structure to convey how children come to know they are dying but conceal this knowledge from their adult caretakers to lessen their sorrow. Since in the course of a semester, students can at best aspire to write a shapely essay, I assign a wide range of exquisite self-reflexive and critical essays to serve as models for their work by such ethnographers as James W. Fernandez, Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, Mary Louise Pratt, Barbara Tedlock,
Dorinne Kondo, Lila Abu-Lughod, Kirin Narayan, and Paul Stoller, among others. I remind students of the point made by James W. Fernandez in *Persuasions and Performances*: “Anthropology begins with ‘revelatory incidents’… those especially charged moments in human relationships which are pregnant with meaning.” In urging students to think about “revelatory incidents” in their work, I have found *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction* by Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz to be an especially helpful guide. I also recommend Robert J. Nash’s *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*. My ultimate aim is to get students to read ethnographies not just for the “information” they gather, which is how I was taught to read in graduate school, but for how they convey their meaning as stories. For this purpose, I find it enlightening to apply to ethnography the argument in Francine Prose’s *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and For Those Who Want to Write Them*.

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**CA: Your 1991 article “Death and Memory” incorporates an idea that would later become a topic of one of your books: that of the “vulnerable observer” (1996). Can you explain the way that you arrived at this method and the differences (if any) in the ways that you incorporate it in your work on memoir and your anthropological work?**

The experience I write about in “Death and Memory,” of being in the Spanish village of Santa María during the summer of 1987, which coincided with the moment when my beloved maternal grandfather was dying of cancer in Miami Beach, definitely led me to begin thinking of the ethnographer as a “vulnerable observer.” I had only five more days left in Spain, surely I’d get back before my grandfather died, but then the news came that he was gone. It was impossible to return to Miami Beach in time for the funeral. I was very devastated. People offered me warm sympathy in Santa María, but I was stricken by feelings of guilt, rage, and moral confusion. I suddenly found the displacement of anthropology to be cruel and senseless. Why had I been in Spain talking with strangers about death rather than being at my grandfather’s side offering him my last goodbye? I’d become an expert on popular Catholicism and could recite the rosary in Spanish from memory, but I knew nothing of Jewish mourning rituals and had no idea how to honor my grandfather within the traditions of my own heritage.

Haunted by this paradox, I struggled with how to write a paper for an upcoming AAA panel on the subject of death rituals in European ethnography. It was in retrospect, in the course of writing, that it became clear to me that the loss of my grandfather and the discussions about changing death practices in Santa María could not be separated. They were entangled stories. Identification and connection, not distance, difference, and otherness, needed to be highlighted.
The observational and participatory methods of classical anthropology were insufficient. I had to also draw on the subtle forms of knowledge found in ineffable moments of intuition and epiphany.

In writing “Death and Memory,” I mixed together levels of experience that are not usually mixed: ethnographic stories of death in rural Spain, which required my objective presence as an ethnographer, and my grandfather's death in Miami Beach, which had taken place in my pained absence. This convergence was a counterpoint, a surrealist moment, when incongruous experiences joined together to bring about an unexpected awareness, a form of knowing and feeling that put vulnerability at the center of ethnographic practice and ethnographic writing.

I went on to Mexico and found myself smack in the middle of the resentment and hurt that so many Mexicans feel when they reflect on what the Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa has called “the open wound” of the border between the United States and Mexico. As a Cuban immigrant with a U.S. passport, I had gained the privilege of being able to cross back and forth. Esperanza Hernandez, a street peddler from the town of Mexquitic in north-central Mexico, mesmerized me with her stories about her life as she reminded me of the politics of the border. Even though there were other women who were easier to like, it was the tough and unforgiving Esperanza who stole my heart. I wrote Translated Woman in awe of the possibility of our relationship, of a Cuban-American anthropologist and a Mexican street peddler being drawn together by the twisted threads of an interconnected colonial and neo-colonial history that had left Esperanza impoverished and borne me across the border from Cuba to United States.

As part of my turn toward being a vulnerable observer, I felt the need to attempt something that was taboo for classical anthropology: I not only presented Esperanza's life story, but in the last chapter I explored my own interpretations and responses to her story, including the consequences that thinking about her story had for my own life. I wrote of my struggles to become an educated woman. Anthropologists are supposed to keep quiet about their lives, so that their focus on “the other” won't become obscured. But I thought it was important for readers to know how I came to be the one with the power to transport Esperanza's story across the border. The last chapter of the book was full of raw emotions about my own upward mobility and the uncertainty and ambivalence it reaped. Coming into power is neither easy nor pretty. I chose not to remove the thorns from my story. Not surprisingly, the chapter made many of my colleagues uncomfortable. Yet Latino and Latina students felt that it spoke to their own anxieties about entering the academy and praised me for my courage. My being vulnerable in my
writing had opened a space for conversations about inclusion and exclusion in anthropology that had been impossible before.

I later worked with a New York Latino theater group, PREGONES, to create a stage adaptation of Translated Woman and found that to be an exciting way to bring anthropological ideas about vulnerable observation to a broader audience. I have come to believe strongly that in order for ethnography to flourish, we must learn to produce ethnographic work that is intellectually profound and also artistically satisfying. Working with PREGONES was very edifying, showing me how a dramatic performance with live actors, acting out a situation that takes place in a fleeting moment in time, can evoke the vulnerability of all human encounters and the fragility of life itself.

In my more recent work I have come full circle as a traveler and ethnographer. I am now engaged in an ongoing process of returning to Cuba, my place of birth, working as a diasporic anthropologist, poet, and filmmaker. To be a vulnerable observer in Cuba is almost inevitable for me. I am constantly questioning my authority and seeking to understand my connection to this place and its people.

Traveling to a place that we left when I was a small child, a place to which my parents refuse to return, a place that gives me so much intellectual, emotional, and artistic nourishment, and at the same time evokes horrible fear and trauma, has stirred many feelings and forced me to keep experimenting with different ways of telling stories about Cuba. I think I've been able to push my idea of being a vulnerable observer toward new dimensions in Cuba because my closest friends there are visual artists, poets, writers, and photographers, who inspire me to think in terms of metaphors and symbols. There is, finally, a special kind of vulnerability that I feel in Cuba because every second I’m in Cuba I can’t help thinking I might have grown up on that island. So when people tell me their stories, always a mix of disenchantment and unbreakable hope, I say to myself, “There but for the grace of God go I.” And yet, afterwards, I get on a plane and I leave. I am always saying goodbye to Cuba.

In my book, An Island Called Home, I've written about the Jewish community in Cuba in the form of chronicles that allowed me to question whether I ever will know the people I’m meeting, if they will always remain elusive. More recently, the experience of tripping and falling on the wrecked streets of Havana, and bruising my right arm to the point of being unable to write for months without terrible pain, led me to write a long poem, “The Broken Streets of My Havana,” which explored a different form of vulnerability, that of the passing of time, and the loss of a city I keep trying to reclaim.
Related Links

http://santamariadelcondado.com/

Interview with Ruth Behar in the Diario de León (24 October 2011)

Photographs taken in the village by Ruth Behar:


http://santamariadelcondado.com/2012/01/10/la-matanza-del-cerdo/

http://santamariadelcondado.com/2011/10/15/recuerdos-santa-maria-del-condado-198081/


Link to the Museo Etnográfico Provincial de León

Ruth Behar reading her short story "La Cortada"

Additional Works by the Author

Books:


Edited Books:


Essays about Ethnographic Writing:

The Staircase of Santa Maria del Monte is a 142-step monumental staircase from 1608 in the old part of the town of Caltagirone, located on the island of Sicily, about 70 km southwest of Catania. This breathtaking staircase that connects the high part of the city to the low part, is the center of many cultural events in Caltagirone. The peculiarity of the staircase is each step is decorated with different hand-decorated ceramic tile, using styles and figures derived from the millennial tradition of pottery making. Twice a year this staircase is used as a backdrop for religious images of patron saints.

Hotels in Santa Maria del Monte start at $102 per night. Prices and availability subject to change. Additional terms may apply. Map. Inspired Santa Maria del Monte Travel Tips. 9 Bucket List Retirement Trips You Must Book Now. Retirement should be the time for you to do the things you have always dreamed of doing. No kids. No worries. We've partnered with Susan Lanier-Graham of Wander With Wonder to show us the top bucket list retirement trips you must book now. We literally wait our entire lives for retirement. Where is Santa Maria del Monte? Losing your way in a foreign place sounds romantic. But if you'd rather get to Santa Maria del Monte on time, listen up. Santa Maria del Monte lies 2 miles east of Induno Olona. It is also 3 miles southeast of Varese. Places to Visit in Santa Maria del Monte. Take a step back through time at Sacred Mountain of the Rosary, a popular place for history lovers. Need more options? Situated 16 miles from Santa Maria del Monte, Torno is adored by travelers. Head to this locality to access Villa Olmo and Cathedral of Como, two excellent attractions that you won't quickly forget. If you've got the time, travel just 17 miles to Argegno.


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