

OTHER BOOKS BY RUTH BEHAR

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Santa María del Monte*

Translated Woman:

Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story

ANTHOLOGIES EDITED BY RUTH BEHAR

Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba

Women Writing Culture

(with Deborah A. Gordon)

The Vulnerable Observer

Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart

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CHAPTER 1

The Vulnerable Observer

It is customary to call books about human beings either toughminded or tenderminded. My own is neither and both, in that it strives for objectivity about that tendermindedness without which no realistic behavioral science is possible.

—George Devereux, *From Anxiety to Method*

IN 1985 an avalanche in Colombia buried an entire village in mud. Isabel Allende, watching the tragedy on television, wanted to express the desperation she felt as she helplessly observed so many people being swallowed by the earth. In her short story "Of Clay We Are Created," Allende writes about Ornaira Sánchez, a thirteen-year-old girl who became the focus of obsessive media attention. News-hungry photographers, journalists, and television camera people, who could do nothing to save the girl's life, descended upon her as she lay trapped in the mud, fixing their curious and useless eyes on her suffering. Amid that horrid audience of onlookers, which included Allende herself watching the cruel "show" on the screen, she places the photographer Rolf Carlé. He too has been looking, gazing, reporting, taking pictures. Then something snaps in him. He can no longer bear to watch silently from behind the camera. He will not document tragedy as an innocent bystander. Crouching down in the mud, Rolf Carlé throws aside his camera and flings his arms around Ornaira Sánchez as her heart and lungs collapse.

The vulnerable observer par excellence, Rolf Carlé incar-

nates the central dilemma of all efforts at witnessing. In the midst of a massacre, in the face of torture, in the eye of a hurricane, in the aftermath of an earthquake, or even, say, when horror looms apparently more gently in memories that won't recede and so come pouring forth in the late-night quiet of a kitchen, as a storyteller opens her heart to a story listener, recounting hurts that cut deep and raw into the gullies of the self, do you, the observer, stay behind the lens of the camera, switch on the tape recorder, keep pen in hand? Are there limits—of respect, piety, pathos—that should not be crossed, even to leave a record? But if you can't stop the horror, shouldn't you at least document it?

Allende assumed that once her story was published, Omaira would disappear from her life. But in *Paula*, her moving memoir of her daughter's sudden and rapid death from porphyria, she finds herself returning to Omaira's story, which has acquired the eerie power of fiction that foretells the future. This time, Allende is painfully close to tragedy, no television screen acting as buffer. Like Rolf Carlé, she must get "down in the mud" with her daughter, who has fallen into a coma, her gaze "focused beyond the horizon where death begins." Sitting at the bedside of Paula, a Sleeping Beauty who will never awaken, Allende, with pen in hand, gives up the possibility of imagining other worlds through fiction. Surrendering to the intractableness of reality, she feels herself setting forth on "an irreversible voyage through a long tunnel; I can't see an exit but I know there must be one. I can't go back, only continue to go forward, step by step, to the end."¹

FOR ME, anthropology is about embarking on just such a voyage through a long tunnel. Always, as an anthropol-

ogist, you go elsewhere, but the voyage is never simply about making a trip to a Spanish village of thick-walled adobe houses in the Cantabrian Mountains, or a garden apartment in Detroit where the planes circle dependently overhead, or a port city of cracking pink columns and impossible hopes known as La Habana, where they tell me I was born. Loss, mourning, the longing for memory, the desire to enter into the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that is always arriving late, as defiant hindsight, a sense of the utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write something, are the stopping places along the way. At the end of the voyage, if you are lucky, you catch a glimpse of a lighthouse, and you are grateful. Life, after all, is bountiful.

But surely this is not the anthropology being taught in our colleges and universities? It doesn't sound like the stuff of which Ph.D.'s are made. And definitely it isn't the anthropology that will win you a grant from the National Science Foundation. Nor to be perfectly honest, is it the anthropology I usually tell people I do. People, say, like my Aunt Rebeca, who is asking me—over a midnight snack of Cuban bread and *café con leche* in bustling Puerto Sagua, where people are devouring, as if there were no tomorrow, enormous plates of steak with browned onions and glistening plantains—why I went into anthropology.

No sé decirte cómo fue . . . I was very young . . . I wanted to write . . . A teacher had faith in me . . . They gave me a fellowship to study anthropology . . . I went to live in a Spanish village . . . There I learned how to recite a rosary and heard my Sephardic ancestors whispering in my ears, "Shame,

shame. . . ." Over the years this anthropology became a way to always be taking leave, a way to always be returning, a way to always be packing and unpacking suitcases, as if I were mimicking the history of our own family, traveling from Europe to the other America, to this America, this Puerto Sagua, not the one of the same name left behind on the island, but this one here where the Cuban bread and café con leche never run dry. . . ."

And then before I have answered her first question, my Aunt Rebeca asks, "Rute, pero dime, what is anthropology?" While I hesitate, she confidently exclaims, "The study of people? And their customs, right?"

Right. People and their customs. Exactly. *Así de fácil*. Can't refute that. Somehow, out of that legacy, born of the European colonial impulse to know others in order to lambast them, better manage them, or exalt them, anthropologists have made a vast intellectual cornucopia. At the anthropological table, to which another leaf is always being added, there is room for studies of Greek death laments, the fate of socialist ideals in Hungary and Nicaragua, Haitian voodoo in Brooklyn, the market for Balinese art, the abortion debate among women in West Fargo, North Dakota, the reading groups of Mayan intellectuals, the proverbs of a Hindi guru, the Bedouin sense of honor, the jokes Native Americans tell about the white man, the plight of Chicana cannery workers, the utopia of Walt Disney World, and even, I hope, the story of my family's car accident on the Belt Parkway shortly after our arrival in the United States from Cuba (the subject to which, in fact, we turned that night in Puerto Sagua, my Aunt Rebeca telling me they heard about it when they opened up the Sunday *Times* the next morning and, in shock, read the news).

Anthropology, to give my Aunt Rebeca a grandiose reply, is the most fascinating, bizarre, disturbing, and necessary form of witnessing left to us at the end of the twentieth century. As a mode of knowing that depends on the particular relationship formed by a particular anthropologist with a particular set of people in a particular time and place, anthropology has always been vexed about the question of vulnerability. Clifford Geertz says, "You don't exactly penetrate another culture, as the masculinist image would have it. You put yourself in its way and it bodies forth and enmeshes you."² Yes, indeed. But just how far do you let that other culture enmesh you? Our intellectual mission is deeply paradoxical: get the "native point of view," *pero por favor* without actually "going native." Our methodology, defined by the oxymoron "participant observation," is split at the root: fact as a participant, but don't forget to keep your eyes open. Lay down in the mud in Colombia. Put your arms around Omaira Sánchez. But when the grant money runs out, or the summer vacation is over, please stand up, dust yourself off, go to your desk, and write down what you saw and heard. Relate it to something you've read by Marx, Weber, Gramsci, or Geertz and you're on your way to doing anthropology.

Nothing is stranger than this business of humans observing other humans in order to write about them. James Agee, sent by *Fortune* magazine on a mission to bring back an enticing story about dirt-poor farmers in the American South during the Depression, furiously wished he could tear up a clump of earth with a hoe and put that on the page and publish it. Instead, he wrote *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a troubled meditation about his fear of exploiting the lives of southern tenant farmers, which forms part of the very account in which he was trying, with an exaggerated sense of propriety and shame, to describe the contours of those same lives.

In different ways, writers like Agee and Allende arrive at that tenderminded toughmindedness which George Devereux suggested thirty years ago should be the goal of any inquiry involving humans observing other humans. Devereux, an ethnopsychiatrist, believed that observers in the social sciences had not yet learned how to make the most of their own emotional involvement with their material. What happens within the observer must be made known, Devereux insisted, if the nature of what has been observed is to be understood. The subjectivity of the observer, he noted, "influences the course of the observed event as radically as 'inspection' influences ('disturbs') the behavior of an electron." The observer "never observes the behavioral event which 'would have taken place' in his absence, nor hears an account identical with that which the same narrator would give to another person." Yet because there is no clear and easy route by which to confront the self who observes, most professional observers develop defenses, namely, "methods," that "reduce anxiety and enable us to function efficiently." Even saying, "I am an anthropologist, this is fieldwork," is a classic form of the use of a method to drain anxiety from situations in which we feel complicitous with structures of power, or helpless to release another from suffering, or at a loss as to whether to act or observe.

Although he acknowledged the subjective nature of all social knowledge, for Devereux self-reflexivity was not an end in itself. Recognizing subjectivity in social observation was a means to a more important end—achieving significant forms of objectivity and therefore truly "true" science.³ Regardless of whether or not we aspire to science (and I, at least, do not), accepting Devereux's premise about the relentless subjectivity of all social observation still leaves us with a practical problem—How do you write subjectivity into ethnography in such

a way that you can continue to call what you are doing ethnography? Should we be worried that a smoke alarm will blare in our ears when the ethnography grows perilously hot and "too personal"?

In *Works and Lives*, Clifford Geertz comes at this question by suggesting that ethnographies are a strange cross between author-saturated and author-evacuated texts, neither romance nor lab report, but something in between. Unlike Devereux, re-making anthropology into a better science is not Geertz's primary concern. Instead, Geertz considers the later phases of the ethnographic process, the moment of writing and the reception of the anthropologist's text. How is it, Geertz wants to know, that anthropologists (a handful of them, anyway) transfigure their observations of other people and places into such persuasive rhetoric that afterward those people and places are unimaginable except through the texts of their authors? As Geertz asserts, "One can go look at Azande again, but if the complex theory of passion, knowledge, and causation that Evans-Pritchard said he discovered there isn't found, we are more likely to doubt our own powers than we are to doubt his—or perhaps simply to conclude that the Zande are no longer themselves."

An anthropologist's conversations and interactions in the field can never again be exactly reproduced. They are unique, irrecoverable, gone before they happen, always in the past, even when written up in the present tense. The ethnography serves as the only proof of the anthropologist's voyage, and the success of the enterprise hinges on how gracefully the anthropologist shoulders what Geertz calls the "burden of authorship." The writing must convey the impression of "close-in contact with far-out lives."

Who decides if this goal has been achieved? Ultimately, says

Geertz, the grounds for accepting one anthropologist's truth over another are extremely "person-specific" (not "personal," he insists, leaving the distinction obscure). For example, Oscar Lewis forcefully disputed the veracity of Robert Redfield's vision of life in Tepotzlán in his own restudy of the same Mexican town, but this did not make the Redfieldian text obsolete. On the contrary, by shifting attention to a diametrically opposed vision of the same people and place, Lewis only succeeded in proving that he and Redfield were *both* right, that they were "different sorts of minds taking hold of different parts of the elephant."⁴

Aware as he is that in anthropology everything depends on the emotional and intellectual baggage the anthropologist takes on the voyage, Geertz, like Devereux, still seems to me to embrace the cause of subjectivity with only half a heart. Devereux champions vulnerability for the sake of science. Geertz, in turn, repeatedly shows us that anthropology—as practiced by greats such as Lévi-Strauss, Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski, and Benedict—is resolutely person-specific and yet somehow not "personal." Ironically, he reserves his harshest criticism for ethnographic writing that takes an autobiographical stance on the pursuit we call "fieldwork," this always going elsewhere, the voyage through the long tunnel. Geertz insists it is inappropriate to interiorize too much "what is in fact an intensely public activity."

But just how public an activity is the work of the anthropologist? Yes, we go and talk to people. Some of these people even have the patience and kindness and generosity to talk to us. We try to listen well. We write fieldnotes about all the things we've misunderstood, all the things that later will seem so trivial, so much the bare surface of life. And then it is time to pack our suitcases and return home. And so begins our work, our hard-

est work—to bring the ethnographic moment back, to resurrect it, to communicate the distance, which too quickly starts to feel like an abyss, between what we saw and heard and our inability, finally, to do justice to it in our representations. Our fieldnotes become palimpsests, useless unless plumbed for forgotten revelatory moments, unexpressed longings, and the wounds of regret. And so, even though we start by going public, we continue our labor through introspection. And then we go public again, and if the first time we dealt in something that came dangerously close to tragedy, the second time around we are definitely in the theater of farce as our uncertainty and dependency on our subjects in the field is shifted into a position of authority back home when we stand at the podium, reading our ethnographic writing aloud to other stressed-out ethnographers at academic conferences held in Hiltons where the channels dangle by a thread and the air-conditioning chills us to the bone. Even Geertz recognizes there is a problem: "We lack the language to articulate what takes place when we are in fact at work. There seems to be a genre missing."⁵

Consider this book a quest for that genre.

FORTUNATELY, I am not alone in this quest.

What does it mean, for example, that an established professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, who co-authored a standard medical text on manic-depressive illness, should now choose to reveal, in a memoir, that she is herself a wounded healer, for she suffers from manic-depressive illness? In *An Unquiet Mind*, a memoir of moods and madness, Kay Redfield Jamison refuses to conceal her transformation of anxiety into method. She announces at the start of her book that she isn't sure what the consequences

will be of giving public voice to her illness: "I have had many concerns about writing a book that so explicitly describes my own attacks of mania, depression, and psychosis, as well as my problems acknowledging the need for ongoing medication. Clinicians have been, for obvious reasons of licensing and hospital privileges, reluctant to make their psychiatric problems known to others. These concerns are often well warranted. I have no idea what the long-term effects of discussing such issues so openly will be on my personal and professional life but, whatever the consequences, they are bound to be better than continuing to be silent. I am tired of hiding, tired of misspent and knotted energies, tired of the hypocrisy, and tired of acting as though I have something to hide."⁶

Later in the book, Jamison tells of her encounter with Mogens Schou, a Danish psychiatrist, who is responsible for the introduction of lithium as a treatment for manic-depressive illness. On a boat ride down the Mississippi River in New Orleans he asks her point-blank, "Why are you *really* studying mood disorders?" She hesitates to answer and he goes on to tell her why he has studied mood disorders—because of depression and manic-depressive illness in his family. "It had been this strong personal motivation that had driven virtually all of his research," and it is Mogens who encourages her, in turn, to use her own experiences in her research, writing, and teaching. Nevertheless, she continues to feel anxious: "Will my work now be seen by my colleagues as somehow biased because of my illness? . . . If, for example, I am attending a scientific meeting and ask a question, or challenge a speaker, will my question be treated as though it is coming from someone who has studied and treated mood disorders for many years, or will it instead be seen as a highly subjective, idiosyncratic view of someone

who has a personal ax to grind? It is an awful prospect, giving up one's cloak of academic objectivity. But, of course, my work has been tremendously colored by my emotions and my experiences. They have deeply affected my teaching, my advocacy work, my clinical practice, and what I have chosen to study: manic-depressive illness."⁷

Not only is Jamison a wounded healer; she lives with the knowledge that, if her illness were to get out of control, she would cease to be able to heal at all. With devastating honesty, she admits she has no guarantee she will remain healthy on a steady dose of lithium and therapy. As she remarks, "I know that I listen to lectures about new treatments for manic-depressive illness with far more than just a professional interest. I also know that when I am doing Grand rounds at other hospitals, I often visit their psychiatric wards, look at their seclusion rooms and ECT suits, wander their hospital grounds, and do my own internal ratings of where I would choose to go if I had to be hospitalized. There is always a part of my mind that is preparing for the worst, and another part of my mind that believes if I prepare enough for it, the worst won't happen."⁸

One of my colleagues, a medical anthropologist, tells me that the main reason Jamison is able to make herself so vulnerable at this moment in time is because of advances in the field of biochemistry, which have led to new understandings of the biochemical roots of depression, making it possible to control the illness through medical supervision and drugs. Science, in other words, has drained the shame out of depression. We saw that process at work when Colin Powell, at the press conference where he announced he wouldn't run for president, answered in quite measured tones, when the subject of his wife's depres-

sion was raised, that yes, indeed, she suffers from depression, but she is receiving medical treatment, just like he takes pills that control his blood pressure, "most of the time."

Yet if science makes it possible for the unspeakable to be spoken, if science opens borders previously closed, why is Jamison so anxious about her revelations? Why is she not more comforted by science? Like other scholars stretching the limits of objectivity, she realizes there are risks in exposing oneself in an academy that continues to feel ambivalent about observers who forsake the mantle of omniscience.

Increasingly, scholars are willing to take such risks. Among the interdisciplinary works emerging from this turn toward vulnerable observation, there is literary critic Alice Kaplan's *French Lessons*, which takes on her own fascination with the French language in the context of Jewish critical thinking about fascism, and the uneasy complicity of French writers who collaborated with the Nazis during World War II. In *Landscape for a Good Woman*, historian Carolyn Kay Steedman offers an account of her mother's life that reveals the inability of British working-class history to account for her mother's resentful and unfulfilled desires for the things of the world. In *Dancing with the Devil*, anthropologist José Limón locates himself as a Chicano not only within his fieldwork but within the long history of military, folkloric, and anthropological representations of Mexicans in the United States, which precede his arrival in the field.⁹

No 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 social facts. Throughout most of the twentieth century, in scholarly fields ranging from literary criticism

to anthropology to law, the reigning paradigms have traditionally called for distance, objectivity, and abstraction. The worst sin was 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 *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, the deed of sale of your own 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 the law and the pursuit of justice for all.¹⁰

Of course, as is the case with any intellectual trend, some experiments work out better than others. It is far from easy to think up interesting ways to locate oneself in one's own text. Writing vulnerably takes as much skill, nuance, and willingness to follow through on all the ramifications of a complicated idea as does writing invulnerably and distantly. I would say it takes yet greater skill. The worst that can happen in an invulnerable text is that it will be boring. But when an author has made herself or himself vulnerable, the stakes are higher: a boring self-revelation, one that fails to move the reader, is more than embarrassing; it is humiliating. To assert that one is a "white middle-class woman" or a "black gay man" or a "working-class Latina" within one's study of Shakespeare or Santería is only interesting 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. Efforts at self-revelation flop not because the personal voice has

Self-revelation
is boring
if it is not
carefully
chosen

been used, but because it has been poorly used, leaving unscrutinized the connection, intellectual and emotional, between the observer and the observed.

Vulnerability doesn't mean that anything personal goes. The exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake. It has to move us beyond that eclipse into inertia, exemplified by Rolf Carlé, in which we find ourselves identifying so intensely with those whom we are observing that all possibility of reporting is arrested, made inconceivable. It has to persuade us of the wisdom of not leaving the writing pad blank.

The charge that all the variants of vulnerable writing that have blossomed in the last two decades are self-serving and superficial, full of unnecessary guilt or excessive bravado, stems from an unwillingness to even consider the possibility that a personal voice, if creatively used, can lead the reader not into miniature bubbles of navel-gazing, but into the enormous sea of serious social issues. Rather than facing the daunting task of assessing the newly vulnerable forms of writing emerging in the academy, critics like Daphne Patai choose to dismiss them all as evidence of a "nouveau solipsism."¹¹

For Patai, my chapter on "the biography in the shadow" in *Translated Woman* is a case in point.¹² There I related my experience of getting tenure at Michigan within a study that explored the life story of Esperanza, 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 privilege (indeed, not without a struggle) that allowed me to bring Esperanza's story across the border. I also reflected on how my Latina background affected my 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 to boost their statistics on affirmative action hirings. This experience called into question my ability to depict Esperanza's mixed identity, on the one hand of Indian descent, on the other cut off from much of her Indian heritage by centuries of colonialism. Was my portrait of her as reductionist, shifting, even hurtful as the university's characterization of me?¹³

It is precisely this chapter, which upsets the academic critics, that has brought so many readers to my ethnography and made them want to listen to a Mexican peddler's life story. I have received several letters from women and men who say that relating my own story made the book whole for them. A woman of Welsh/German ancestry writes, "It's 10:30 at night and I'm crying. I've just finished your book *Translated Woman*, flipping between the last chapter and the footnotes, between my WASP life and my daughter's and yours and Esperanza's; I feel such gratitude for your (that's plural) courage and empathy in the arduous journey toward understanding that I'm writing my first ever fan letter at the age of 57." A Chicana anthropology student in Los Angeles told me the book empowered her doubly: she could see her mother in Esperanza and she could see herself in me. Another woman, of mixed Colombian and Puerto Rican background, told me in a letter: "I was so glad to hear you're exploring the dilemmas regarding positions of power and negotiation of entry that I too struggle with in doing ethnography. *Translated Woman* has brought both you and Esperanza to voice. You are both helping me come to voice, as well." A man in New York, who remembered we

had been fellow students in college, 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 impresses me about these responses (besides, of course, the tremendous kindness of people who take the time to write such encouraging letters) is that readers need to see a connection between Esperanza and me, despite our obvious differences, and they need to see a connection back to themselves as well. In responding to my response to Esperanza, readers always also tell me something of their own life stories and their own struggles. Since I have put myself in the ethnographic picture, readers feel they have come to know me. They have poured their own feelings into their construction of me and in that way come to identify with me, or at least their fictional image of who I am. These responses have taught me that when readers take the voyage through anthropology's tunnel it is themselves they must be able to see in the observer who is serving as their guide.

WHEN YOU write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably. A different set of problems and predicaments arise which would never surface in response to more detached writing. What is the writer's responsibility to those who are moved by her writing? Devereux spoke in great detail of the observer's countertransference, but what about the reader's? Should I feel good that my writing makes a reader break out crying? Does an emotional response lessen or enhance intellectual understanding? Emotion has only recently gotten a foot inside the academy and we still don't know whether we want to give it a seminar room, a lecture hall, or just a closet we can air out now and then.

Even I, a practitioner of vulnerable writing, am sometimes at a loss to say how much emotion is bearable within academic settings. Last fall, at a feminist anthropology conference at the University of Michigan organized by the graduate students, I found myself in just such a dilemma as a new colleague prefaced her remarks by turning warmly toward me to say my work had given her permission to speak in ways that are taboo in the academy. Naturally I was flattered, but also I felt apprehensive. What would I find myself responsible for? She began to read, first from her ethnographic writing about spirit possession in India, giving detailed and thoughtful descriptions in a cool and controlled voice. Suddenly, she switched gears. Her tone grew passionate as she recounted her own experience of being brutally beaten by a former husband in a possession trance. She had not read this section of her work aloud before and her voice trembled. Soon the tears came to her eyes. She had to stop several times to catch her breath. By the end, she was sobbing.

The room was packed. All the available seats were taken and there were people standing in the back. In an effort to create a more feminist and egalitarian environment, the students had arranged the chairs in a circle, so there was a huge gaping hole, a cavern, in the middle of the room. When my colleague had finished speaking, a terrible silence, like a dark storm cloud, descended upon everyone. A part of me wished the cavern in the middle of the room would open up and swallow us all, so we wouldn't have to speak.

After what seemed an eternity, another anthropology colleague, in her kindest voice, tried to take charge of the situation by commenting on the disparity between the two voices—the detached ethnographic voice and the exceedingly emotional personal voice. After a while, I too spoke, feeling obliged to

speaking. I took up where my colleague left off, and wondered aloud how we, as ethnographers, might go about writing emotion into the personal material without draining it all from the ethnography. My colleague, I realized, had made an all-too-common mistake, which I had come to recognize in my own writing: she paced her story in such a way that the ethnography moved along, steady, like a train cutting through a field, and then, *Boom! Bang! Crash!* There was the wrenching personal story of the suffering anthropologist. How, I asked—of my colleague and of myself—might we make the ethnography as passionate as our autobiographical stories? What would that take? And how might we unsettle expectations by writing about ourselves with more detachment and about others with all the fire of feeling? Can we give both the observer and the observed a chance at tragedy? As I spoke, people in the audience nodded their heads. Everyone seemed relieved that I, the champion of personal writing, was putting autobiography back in its place as the handmaiden of ethnography.

My new colleague had by this time calmed down and wiped away her tears. Even though I had responded sensibly and given her what everyone took to be a very constructive comment, I felt like I had failed her. What kept me glued to my chair, unable to rise and embrace her? Like Ornaira Sánchez, she'd been in trouble. Unlike Rolf Carlé, I had watched her from a distance, sinking into the cavern in the middle of the room.

The image of my colleague, alone before the cavern, flashed before my eyes again when I was in Cuba early this year attending a women's conference about writing and art. A young writer, reading her fiction aloud for the first time, grew so nervous that her body shook convulsively. She tried to read, but she couldn't keep her hands still long enough to hold up her

notebook. Immediately, one after another, the older, established writers present leaped to her side and put their arms around her. Soon, she was reading, still shaking but concentrating on her story. In fact, she went way over her time. After being politely asked to cut her reading short, she had become a furious prima donna. I felt she had lost her right to any sympathy. Later in the conference, another woman, talking about divided Cuban families, began to cry and could no longer go on speaking. This time the audience spontaneously began to applaud, louder and louder, as if to finish her sentence. Many of those clapping were crying, too.

In Michigan, all that emotion scared us, scared me. So we stayed quiet, like obedient schoolchildren waiting for the teacher to scold us. And, sadly, I became that teacher, ruler in hand, making my own knuckles bleed.

TO WRITE vulnerably is to open a Pandora's box. Who can say what will come flying out? When I began, nine years ago, to make my emotions part of my ethnography, I had no idea where this work would take me or whether it would be accepted within anthropology and the academy. I began with a sense of urgency, a desire to embed a diary of my life within the accounts of the lives of others that I was being required to produce as an anthropologist. As a student I was taught to maintain the same strict boundary Malinowski had kept between his ethnography and his autobiography. But I'd reached a point where these forms of knowing were no longer so easily separated. And I came to realize that in much contemporary writing, these genres seemed to have exchanged places, ethnography becoming more autobiographical while autobiography had become more ethnographic.¹⁴ As I wrote, the ethnographer in

me wanted to know: Who is this woman who is writing about others, making others vulnerable? What does she want from others? What do the others want from her? The feminist in me wanted to know: What kind of fulfillment does she get—or not get—from the power she has? The novelist in me wanted to know: What, as she blithely goes about the privilege of doing research, is the story she isn't willing to tell?

Unconsciously at first, but later with more direction, I chose the essay as a genre through which to *attempt* (the original meaning of *essai*, or essay) the dialectic between connection and otherness that is at the center of all forms of historical and cultural representation.¹⁵ The essay has been described as "an act of personal witness. The essay is at once the inscription of a self and description of an object." An amorphous, open-ended, even rebellious genre that desegregates the boundaries between self and other, the essay has been the genre of choice for radical feminists and cultural critics pursuing thick description.¹⁶ And perhaps too, through the essay, anthropologists can come closest to fulfilling those illicit desires, so frequently alluded to in Malinowski's diary, of longing to write poetry, fiction, drama, memoir, anything but ethnography, that second-hand genre we have inherited.¹⁷

The more colleagues called upon me to present my work at conferences, workshops, and public lectures, the more desperate I felt; time was being taken away from me to do the *really creative writing* I wanted to do. That *really creative writing* was being perpetually put on hold, perpetually postponed. So I began to write public performance pieces which were fringed with snatches of that other writing. These pieces—which I presented like a truant schoolgirl, hesitantly, apologetically, as failures to produce what I was expected to produce—called for an intellectual *and* emotional engagement from the listener.

Gradually I realized why I was acting like a truant schoolgirl: my anthropological mask was peeling off. Committed to speaking as a Latina, to speaking, therefore, from the margins rather than from the center of the academy, I was coming to see that I had been playing the role of the second-rate *gringa*. I felt uneasy with the entitlement I had earned, of being able to speak from the "macro" position, of being able to speak unequivocally and uncritically for others. At the same time, I began to understand that I had been drawn to anthropology because I had grown up within three cultures—Jewish (both Ashkenazi and Sephardic), Cuban, and American—and I needed to better connect my own profound sense of displacement with the professional rituals of displacement that are at the heart of anthropology. As these ideas grew clearer in my mind, I found myself resisting the "I" of the ethnographer as a privileged eye, a voyeuristic eye, an all-powerful eye. Every ethnography, I knew, depended on some form of ethnographic authority. But as an ethnographer for whom the professional ritual of displacement continually evoked the grief of diaspora, I distrusted my own authority. I saw it as being constantly in question, constantly on the point of breaking down.

What first propelled me to try to write ethnography in a vulnerable way was the intense regret and self-loathing I felt when my maternal grandfather died of cancer in Miami Beach while I was away doing a summer's fieldwork in Spain. The irony was heightened by the fact that I had gone to Spain, knowing that my grandfather was dying, with a mission to gather material for an academic paper I'd been asked to write for a panel on "the anthropology of death." To talk about death with the aging peasant villagers who had initiated me into anthropology became at once a distressing exercise in surrealism and the most charged moment of empathy for the suffering of

others that I have ever experienced. Hesitantly, I put down my first impressions in an early version of "Death and Memory" and presented it at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. The audience was moved, but I emerged shaken and uncertain. What had I done? By turning some of the spotlight on myself had I drawn attention away from "bigger" issues in the study of the anthropology of death? What was I seeking from my colleagues? Empathy? Pity? Louder applause?

I was so confused I put the essay away and returned to writing about women's witchcraft in eighteenth-century Mexico. Two summers later, in 1989, I pulled out the essay again. By then my status had shifted dramatically. I had won a major award that confirmed for my parents that they were right to leave Cuba. Michigan, in turn, granted me tenure, the immigrant dream of security. "Be grateful to this country," my mother said. "In Cuba you would have been cutting sugarcane." The daughter, at last, was reaping the rewards of her parents' displacement. It was a moment when I ought to have been happy, but I'd fallen into a state of mourning. I was mourning a loss for which I knew I deserved no sympathy—the loss of my innocence when I let Michigan toy with my most intimate sense of identity and buy me out. I didn't say a word about any of this in "Death and Memory." The essay drew its emotional force from the unspeakableness of my sorrow.¹⁸

Other essays, mixing the personal and the ethnographic, quickly followed. From Spain, I went to Mexico, where the whole course of my life and work changed as I felt in my own flesh how the border between the United States and Mexico is, in Gloria Anzaldúa's words, "*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds."¹⁹ *Translated Woman* is about a terrible irony: that Esperanza crosses the

border as a literary weeback through my account of her life story. Yet, as I wrote *Translated Woman*, my friend Marta, also from Mexquitic, was settling down on this side of the border. In fact, she'd moved to Detroit, a half hour away from my home in Ann Arbor, and become my "neighbor." The border, the unforgiving border of race and class, I discovered, doesn't begin in Laredo. Marta's parents back in Mexquitic, who had shared their heart and house with us, had asked me to keep an eye on Marta, to try to save her from the dangers they knew all too well existed on the other side. I wrote "My Mexican Friend Marta Who Lives Across the Border from Me in Detroit" out of anguish, because I feared I'd not lived up to my part of the friendship, because I'd not done enough to stop Marta from punishing herself, forcing herself to become modern, by having a hysterectomy at twenty-six.²⁰

Bill T. Jones has written that "all dance exists in memory." As he so lyrically put it, "The dancer steps, he pushes the earth away and is in the air. One foot comes down, followed by the other. It's over. We agree, dancer and watcher, to hold on to the illusion that someone flew for a moment." There is no physical evidence, says Jones. The material world is a place "that exists only in the moment, a place of illusion."²¹ And the body itself, as I show in "The Girl in the Cast," is a site of memory, a place of illusion that is crushingly real. "The Girl in the Cast," the most personal essay in this book, is a confrontation with the most bitter fate that can befall an anthropologist. It is about the anthropologist who can go nowhere, the anthropologist who has turned agoraphobic and is unable to move beyond her bed, the anthropologist who has lost her way in the long tunnel and, this time, is sure she will never find the exit.

The tunnel I grew lost in was the tunnel leading back to Cuba. I took a long detour, via Spain and Mexico, to get back to

this place where my childhood got left behind. And now I despair that for me Cuba will become just another anthropological field site. But it may well have to be that or nothing. The dilemma of going home, the place that anthropologists are always leaving from rather than going to, is the subject of "Going to Cuba." Nowhere am I more vulnerable than in Cuba and among Cubans as I search for a way to become a bridge between the island and the diaspora. As a "promoter" of cultural bridges, I have an almost diabolical power—I can obtain visas for island friends to visit the United States, some of whom will choose to defect, some of whom will return to the envy and spite of those who have not had the chance to see the world beyond the ocean. And I ask myself: Back home, in Cuba, have I, the returning immigrant child whose parents spared her from having to cut sugarcane, become the ugliest of border guards? This anthropology isn't for the softhearted.

NOR IS it for those who "marvel that anyone could choose a profession of such profound alienation and repeated loss."²² But that is not the worst of it. No, the worst of it is that not only is the observer vulnerable, but so too, yet more profoundly, are those whom we observe.

An example of such vulnerability can be seen in the Italian movie rendition of "The Postman," which stunningly evokes the deep impression that the poet Pablo Neruda made upon "an ordinary man" in a small fishing village. The scene when this postman, his family, and neighbors pore over a foreign newspaper account of Neruda's sojourn in their village, expecting to find some mention of themselves, struck me as especially poignant in depicting the sense of loss and alienation experienced by those who took the poet-exile into their lives expecting that

he, too, would take them into his own life with the same fullness of feeling. We anthropologists—merely poor relatives of Pablo Neruda—leave behind our own trail of longings, desires, and unfulfilled expectations in those upon whom we descend. About that vulnerability we are still barely able to speak.

SKEPTICS might reasonably ask: At a moment when the autobiographical voice is so highly commodified—most visibly in the talk shows of Oprah and Geraldo Rivera—shouldn't scholars write against the grain of this personalizing of culture rather than reproduce it? Indeed, a recent trend among some anthropologists is to work as overseers of large teams of assistants on big research projects, with themes ranging from multigenerational perspectives on women's perceptions of their bodies to the role played by race and class in achieving academic success among high school students of different ethnic groups. The tendency is to depersonalize one's connection to the field, to treat ethnographic work (only a small part of which is done personally by the principal investigator) as that which is "other" to the "self," and to accumulate masses of data that can be compared, contrasted, charted, and serve as a basis for policy recommendations, or at least as a critique of existing practices. This is not the only depersonalizing trend. A number of anthropologists accord prestige value to "high theory" and produce accounts that are starkly unpeopled about concepts like neocolonialism, transnationalism, and postmodernism, among other "isms." Still others, as I once did, have retreated to history, to the quiet of the archives and the study of the past, where presumably an observer can do less damage, not have to be quite so disturbingly present.

Clearly, vulnerability isn't for everyone. Nor should it be.

Anthropology is wide-ranging enough to include many different ways of witnessing. But it seems to me that some of these depersonalizing trends reflect a fear that the personal turn in the academy has gone too far and must be stopped before all hell breaks loose. But hell, I fear, has already broken loose: autobiography has emerged, for better or worse, as the key form of storytelling in our time, with everyone doing it, from Shirley Maclaine to Colin Powell to professors of French and psychiatry. Isn't it a pity that scholars, out of some sense of false superiority, should try to rise above it all?

In anthropology, which historically exists to "give voice" to others, there is no greater taboo than self-revelation. The impetus of our discipline, with its roots in Western fantasies about barbaric others, has been to focus primarily on "cultural" rather than "individual" realities. The irony is that anthropology has always been rooted in an "I"—understood as having a complex psychology and history—observing a "we" that, until recently, was viewed as plural, ahistorical, and nonindividuated.

Lately, anthropologists have been pushing at that irony, seeking another voice in anthropology that can accommodate complex I's and we's both here and there. This has led to a re-theorization of genres like the life history and the life story, and the creation of hybrid genres like self-ethnography and ethnobiography. Personal narratives have a long tradition in anthropology, stemming from the studies of Native American cultures conducted by the first generation of anthropologists in the United States. The assumption behind the early quest for personal narratives was that native cultures had been broken, like ceramic pots, and the best you could do was study them in bits and pieces, from key individuals, who in telling their stories brought to light the disappearing, and often disappeared, lifeways of a group.²³

The genres of life history and life story are merging with the *testimonio*, which speaks to the role of witnessing in our time as a key form of approaching and transforming reality. Producing testimony became a crucial therapeutic tool in the treatment of people who suffered psychological trauma under state terrorism. It was practiced in Europe with Holocaust survivors, and in Latin America it was introduced in the 1970s as a way of helping people come to terms with the psychic and social effects of political repression on their lives. Its use spread to Central America and it became a key genre for the expression of consciousness-raising among indigenous women leaders. *I, Rigoberta Menchú* became the symbol of that movement, in which the purpose of bearing witness is to motivate listeners to participate in the struggle against injustice.²⁴

Another influence, in the United States, is the work of minority writers, like those included in the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by the Chicana writers Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, which discussed experiences of racism and discrimination as well as of coming to ethnic consciousness. These first-person narratives, written by those who previously had been more likely to be ethnographed rather than the ethnographer, challenged monolithic views of identity in the United States, asserted the multiplicity of American cultures, and deconstructed various orientalisms, challenging the assumption that the anthropologist was the sole purveyor of ethnographic truth. In turn, the renewed interest in the tradition of African-American autobiography, with its origins in the personal narratives of ex-slaves, spoke to the importance of telling the stories of the "black self" as a form of protest against racist images that too eagerly collectivized the individual nuances and diverse life trajectories within the African-American experience.²⁵

The last decade of 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. As those who used to be "the natives" have become scholars in their own right, often studying their home communities and nations, the lines between participant and observer, friend and stranger, aboriginal and alien are no longer so easily drawn. We now have a notable group of "minority" anthropologists with a range of ambivalent connections to the abandoned and reclaimed "homelands" in which they work. The importance of this "native anthropology" has helped to bring about a fundamental shift—the shift toward viewing identification, rather than difference, as the key defining image of anthropological theory and practice. We no longer, as Clifford Geertz put it in a much-quoted phrase, strain to read the culture of others "over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong." We now stand on the same plane with our subjects; indeed, they will only tolerate us if we are willing to confront them face to face.²⁶

These shifts, in tandem with the feminist movement's assertion that the "personal is political," have changed the way scholars in a wide range of disciplines think about the subject and subjectivity of their work. Feminist writers within the academy have devoted a considerable amount of energy to reflecting on biography and autobiography, and the difficult question of how women are to make other women the subjects of their gaze without objectifying them and thus ultimately betraying them.²⁷ The rethinking of objectivity being carried out by feminists who study the sciences—among them Evelyn Fox Keller, Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, and Hillary Rose—has likewise put at the top of the agenda Devereux's dream of

doing social science more subjectively so it will be more objective. As Sandra Harding puts it, "The beliefs and behaviors of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of research. This evidence too must be open to critical scrutiny no less than what is traditionally defined as relevant evidence."²⁸ Or, in the words of Donna Haraway, "Location is about vulnerability; location resists the politics of closure, finality."²⁹ At the end of the road for feminist science is a vision of utopia—where objectivity will be so completely revised that situated knowledges will be tough enough to resist the coups of dictatorial forms of thought.

Literary criticism has likewise been moving toward a more vulnerable and situated view of the critic's task. A famous early example is Jane Tompkins's "Me and My Shadow," a piece of literary criticism that is continually "disrupted" by reflections about the author's bodily presence as she writes—her stockings feet, looking out the window, deciding whether or not to go to the bathroom.³⁰ More recently, Susan Rubin Suleiman has reflected on these shifts: "When I was in graduate school at Harvard in the early sixties, it was understood that good academic writing—in my case, literary criticism—aimed for impersonality and objectivity. What did a poem or a novel or an essay mean? Or, if you were more sophisticated: How did a work mean, how was it 'put together' to produce a certain effect? These were the questions we were taught to ask, and the first rule we learned was that in answering them, one must never say 'I.' Nor, of course, should one make humorous remarks, or play on words, or try for 'literary' or 'poetic' effects, or in any other way seek to put one's self, noticeably, into one's critical writing." Today, Suleiman claims, those rules no longer exist. "It is now all right to say 'I' in writing about literature. . . . The line between 'literature' and 'writing about literature' has itself

begun to waver . . . Some critics are now read as poets and novelists are read: not only for what they have to say, but for their personal voice and style." Her essays, Suleiman says, are not "straight autobiography," but "mediated autobiography," where the exploration of the writer's self takes place indirectly, through the mediation of writing about another, in her case, the work of writers and artists of the twentieth century.³¹

Such mediation is at the center of the new feminist biographical criticism. Toril Moi, for example, undertakes a thorough reading of Simone de Beauvoir's literary corpus to show how Beauvoir, far from being a perfect feminist role model, struggled to incarnate freedom. In Beauvoir's fiction, Moi notes, there is "always a woman who sacrifices her independence for love"; in her autobiographies, on the other hand, "the ideal of the autonomous woman is always present."³² Beauvoir's relationship with Sartre is examined closely and thoughtfully, and as Moi points out, Sartre's pact of freedom (basically, he traded two years of monogamy for a lifetime of infidelity) was paralleled by Beauvoir's myth of unity, the myth of the Sartre-Beauvoir couple.

That this myth often fell apart for Beauvoir was dramatized in the anxiety attacks witnessed by friends and acquaintances, in which she would burst into floods of tears in a café, and then just as suddenly she'd dry her tears, powder her face, straighten her clothes, and rejoin the conversation as if nothing had happened.³³ Yet Beauvoir refused Sartre's proposal of marriage and tried to overcome her "weakness" through strict schedules of walking and writing. She rejected the traditional bourgeois position of the married woman, but emotionally Beauvoir was bound to Sartre. Moi suggests that Beauvoir's depression, rooted in the fear of loss of love, caught up with her as she grew older, though she refused to pay it any attention. According to

Moi, "On every page of her letters to Sartre she complains about her loneliness and emotional neediness and assures him that she is perfectly happy, totally satisfied with his love for her, and that she cannot wish for a better life. But this precisely is what Freud understands by disavowal. . . . Beauvoir both sees and does not see her own sorrow." Moi speculates that Beauvoir seemed "under a compulsion to repeat her cycles of depression, anxiety and fear of abandonment throughout her life. . . . Perhaps the presence of pain, in the end, felt more comforting to her than the fearsome emptiness of existential freedom?" Moi concludes that "Beauvoir poignantly conveys to us what it cost her to become a woman admired by a whole world for her independence."³⁴

Moi's feminist study of Beauvoir, like Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind*, is part of a torrent of new writing about women and depression. These writings range from popular psychological texts (Maggie Scarf's *Unfinished Business*) to academic psychological studies (Dana Crowley Jack's *Silencing the Self*) to memoirs about depression (*Washington Post* reporter Tracy Thompson's *The Beast: A Reckoning with Depression*) to popular biographies (Diane Wood Middlebrook's *Anne Sexton*). In this literature there is a powerful implicit—and often also explicit—criticism of the North American male ethos of always keeping a stiff upper lip and pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. The women who write these accounts, whether about themselves or other women, point to weaknesses, are all too aware of dependencies, admit to the need for medication (lithium, Prozac), and allow themselves to be painfully honest—in ways that our great feminist heroine Simone de Beauvoir didn't dare—about how they deal with the emotional fallout of being intellectual women in the late twentieth century.

VULNERABILITY, in short, is here to stay. Critics can keep dismissing these trends as forms of "solipsism," but a lot of us are going to continue wearing our hearts on our sleeves. To what should we attribute these trends? Is it mere whining? Or have we entered, as they say in Cuba, *a special period*?

The brilliant and terrible shorthand, *el periodo especial*, began to be used in Cuba at the dawn of the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The cold war, it appeared, was over. The communist world was gone, toppled by free markets and capitalism. For Cuba, a defiant socialist island within spitting distance of the great capitalist mecca, which had depended on the socialist bloc for economic and ideological support, this was the beginning of the end. A wild scramble for food, fuel, and dollars ensued, and the key symbols of prerevolutionary decadence—tourism, prostitution, and foreign capitalist investment—returned with a vengeance. As doctors and dentists fixed up their cars and became cab drivers, and former revolutionaries swallowed their pride and dug up the addresses of their relatives in Miami to ask for a couple of dollars to buy cooking oil, the old revolutionary social values of reciprocity and laboring for the common good grew confused. What had the years of sacrifice—always for the sake of a messianic time not yet arrived—finally yielded? How had an island of utopian dreamers become so desperately vulnerable?

Cuba's *special period* epitomizes a more widespread loss of faith in master texts, master ideologies, steadfast truths, and monolithic ways of imagining the relation between self and community. In different ways, the rest of the world is also living through a special period. So many intellectual, political, socioeconomic, and emotional transformations are unfolding si-

multaneously as our century comes to a close. From the global arena to the intimate stirrings of the human heart, the disintegration of the old world order has provoked, as the writer Margaret Randall suggests, "a general reevaluation of stories we once accepted at face value, whatever our position in the fray."³⁵ New stories are rushing to be told in languages we've never used before, stories that tell truths we once hid, truths we didn't dare acknowledge, truths that shamed us.

As with the island of Cuba, everything has already happened and everything has yet to happen. And that is absolutely terrifying, but maybe, finally, it will prove absolutely liberating.

PEOPLE AND their customs. . . . I can hear my Aunt Rebecca asking: "Do you learn anything about Spaniards, Mexicans, Jews, Cubans, Jubans from reading these essays?" And I imagine myself replying, "Only insofar as you are willing to view them from the perspective of an anthropologist who has come to know others by knowing herself and who has come to know herself by knowing others. You should know that my one major vulnerability, my Achilles' heel, which I always thought was a problem in my becoming an anthropologist, is that I can't read a map. I'm the sort of person who gets lost just going around the corner. I think I got through school because they stopped teaching geography in American universities."

If you don't mind going places without a map, follow me.