

## LITERARY ETHNOGRAPHY: ETHNOGRAPHIC WRITING AS A GOOD READ

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**E**thnography, as a research style, began as the prime technique employed in study of culture by social anthropologists of the classical tradition, with Malinowski, Boas, Radcliffe-Browne, and Evans-Pritchard being the most well known names among them (Brewer 11; Hughes 441). With the exception of Boas, all of the aforementioned were British or worked in Britain, and the reason for this can be traced back to social anthropology's colonial ties. Social anthropology's starting point was linked to the British Empire's need to "understand the cultures and groups it was seeking to rule once the period of colonial conquest was completed and assimilation in the 'British family of nations' was possible" (Brewer 11).

Aside from being just a research style or process, however, ethnography is also a "textual product" (Agar 73; Hughes 441). Classical ethnographic writing finds its model in Bronislaw Malinowski's work, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, where he employs a voice that is "dispassionate and distant" and "studiously avoided any discussions of his personal life and emotions" (Behar, "Ethnography: Cherishing..." 472). Malinowski proudly heralds this form of writing in his book as the "advent of professional, scientific ethnography" that was removed from the "distorted, childish caricature of a human being"—which were prevalent images in travel essays, memoirs, and other personal accounts of seafarers, missionaries, soldiers, and other travelers during his time (cited in Pratt 27). Along with Boas and Radcliffe-

Browne, Malinowski was "committed to anthropology as a science" and firmly believed that ethnography—central to what makes anthropological work scientific—"...involved the collection of information firsthand by the anthropologist and the description of the social and cultural characteristics of existing 'primitive' societies—as against attempts to infer their history or to judge them in terms of evolutionary level" (Atkinson and Hammersley 250). Thus the "disciplinization" of this field of study occurred when it was removed from the hand of "amateurs" and handed over to "newly-created professionals" who were legitimized because they employed "science" (Viweswaran 27).

Ethnography since then has been criticized for its associations with "Western centers of power" (Behar, "Ethnography and the Book..." 15) with the propagation of imperialist and colonial propaganda (Prahlad 22), its "reductive anecdotes" (Tsoa 178), its arrogance in presuming an objective stance on studying the "other", and its "pretensions to being a science" (Barnard 96). When it was recognized that there was no "perfectly transparent or neutral way to represent the natural or social world", this encouraged the emergence of "reflections on the rhetoric of ethnographic accounts" in contemporary literature on ethnography (Atkinson and Hammersley 254).

#### **WRITING CULTURE AND THE CRISIS IN ETHNOGRAPHY**

Postmodernists challenged the idea of the "ethnographic authority" and have highlighted the ways by which ethnography makes and writes culture (Willis and Trondman 6) as well as focused attention on the production—including the writing—of ethnography. This has given way to new and experimental trends (Clifford 13) and may have been one of the reasons why, considering the issues that have been raised against classical ethnography, it failed to experience the inevitable decline and remains popular to this day, most especially in the social sciences and humanities, in spite of its "history of shame" (Behar, "Ethnography and the Book..." 16).

One of these notable trends is the encouragement of the researcher's self-reflexivity and acknowledgement of his or her own thoughts, feelings, and experiences in the field as valid concerns in the production and content of ethnographic writing. The rise of the personal narrative in ethnography acknowledges a shift from "an observer fixed on the edge of a space, looking in and/or down upon what is the other" to a "position already within or down in the middle of things, looking and being looked at, talking and being talked at" (Pratt 32). Pushing the envelope further are works of anthropologists who blur the distinctions between ethnography and literature, social science and art.

The seminal collection of essays on Anthropology, *Writing Culture*, aside from acknowledging the crisis ethnography was facing with regard to the collapse of ethnographic authority and contestations in the practice of cultural representation, also made "a very obvious point: that anthropologists write. And further, that what they write, namely ethnographies—a strange cross between the realist novel, the travel account, the memoir, and the scientific report—had to be understood in terms of poetics and politics" (Behar, "Introduction..." 20). Mary Louise Pratt, the sole female included in *Writing Culture* and considered a literary critic instead of an anthropologist, takes up this idea of the ethnographer as "author" and suggests a recognition that ethnographic writing is as much "trope governed as any other discursive formation" and that an acknowledgement of this "is obviously fundamental for those who are interested in changing or enriching ethnographic writing..." (26). She uses the example of the controversy that arose with Florinda Donner's ethnographic account of how, as a graduate student of Anthropology, Donner travelled to Venezuela and while there was invited by the Yanomomo—a remote indigenous group—to stay with them. The monograph, *Shabono: A True Adventure in the Remote and Magical Heart of the South American Jungle*, received much acclaim but soon gained notoriety because of accusations that Donner plagiarized it from a previously published account of another female who was kidnapped by the Yanomama as a young girl after they had attacked her family. Aside from questioning the veracity of the first-hand witnessing of the Yanomomo way of life,

the writing style of the account was also questioned. Pratt calls attention to what the critics found problematic, and provides quotations from one of them: "*Shabono's* failure to be science arises...from its 'narcissistic focus' on Donner's 'personal growth in the field.' 'To confine anthropology to the personal experiences of specific anthropologists is to deny its status as a social science' and 'renders the discipline trivial and inconsequential.'" (30)

Although personal accounts of ethnographers out on the field were a known subgenre in anthropology, they usually came after a more "formal ethnography"—and this is the "book Donner has not...written". Unlike their counterparts, these personal accounts used language that was literary, at times even poetic, and revealed the humanity of the researcher that the formal ethnographic account tried to efface in its use of a serious, detached tone. Pratt then makes the observation that, these personal accounts aside, the bulk of ethnographic writing is considerably "boring", and this causes the layperson to wonder how "such interesting people doing such interesting things produce such dull books" (31-33).

The presence of the artistic and literary turn in ethnography is not entirely new. As early as the 1930's, Zora Neal Hurston's play *Mule Bone* used material culled from immersion in the American South to present an accurate portrayal of African Americans on stage (Staple 62). Margaret Mead, a well-known anthropologist and figure in mass media, saw "the task of the anthropologist" as someone who will use science as a "tool for gathering insights" and art as an instrument "for the expression of these insights" and, combined, they will "communicate truths about the human condition" (Lutkehaus 189). Their chosen ethnographic writing styles though, were not considered appropriate by most of their peers, and Mead had been regarded as a populist and her style of writing labeled as "science fiction", the "observations of a lady novelist", "feminine and exemplary of the 'rustling-of-the-wind-in-the-palm-trees' kind of anthropological writing" by her male colleagues. It was only with the rally for a "new ethnography" that her skills as a writer were recognized (188). As Ruth Behar points out in the introduction to *Women Writing Culture*:

In an act of sanctioned ignorance, the category of the new ethnography failed to take into account that throughout the twentieth century women had crossed the border between anthropology and literature—but usually “illegally,” as aliens whose works tended to be viewed in the profession as “confessional” and “popular” or, in the words of Virginia Woolf, as “little notes.” The *Writing Culture* agenda, conceived in homoerotic terms by male academics for other male academics, provided the official credentials, and the cachet, that women had lacked for crossing the border. Even the personal voice, undermined when used by women, was given the seal of approval in men’s ethnographic accounts, reclassified in more academically favorable terms as “reflexive” and “experimental”. (4)

The book *Women Writing Culture* is a response to the exclusion of women from the *Writing Culture* project. It also set out with an agenda: *Women Writing Culture* “includes biographical, historical, and literary essays, fiction, autobiography, theatre, poetry, life stories, travelogues, social criticism, fieldwork accounts, and blended texts of various kinds”—a “refusal to separate creative writing from critical writing.” It is a challenge to the “distancing and alienating forms of self-expression” that actually stems from “academic elitism” (7).

Behar notes this aversion to the use of literary prose in ethnographic writing in several of her essays, stating that the “literary turn in anthropology is often dismissed as an exercise in self-indulgence” (Introduction...20). “...there is a huge fear of good writing in anthropology—the assumption being that good writing has a scary tendency to be precious, a bit too full of itself...Good writing is also seen as a distraction from the reality at hand that needs to be analyzed rigorously and unselfishly” (Writing... 153). She was not alone in discerning this avoidance of literary language. Herb Childress in “Kinder Ethnographic Writing” talks further on how the use of jargon and theory in ethnographic

papers actually reflect power relations between the author, reader and participant:

This belief in the primacy of theory is, among other things, a means of exclusion, a way for us to talk knowingly behind the backs of our participants. The more we write in frameworks, the more we focus on that audience that shares (primarily through advanced education and, thus, enculturation into the rules we hold dear) the desire and ability to follow abstract argument and the background to catch our references. (256)

Behar reveals that within academic circles, those perceived to be popularizers have received much derision ("Ethnography and the Book..."). But she contends that there is actually a need to make aspects of academic research popular and to make them accessible to a wider range of people and not limit its readability to just other academics. These excursions, be it physical or intellectual, should be of interest to a much wider public if these studies are to have an impact on policy, law, "public culture and debate" and for it to actually be of benefit to the participants of the study and humanity in general. If ethnography is ever to realize its potential to liberate, then it needs to possess a "strong, heartfelt" voice that can tell compelling stories.

### **THE "BLURRING OF GENRES"**

Ethnography has been described to exist in a sort of "academic limbo-land" due to claims that it is "the most scientific of the humanities and the most humanistic of the sciences" (Van Maanen 13) and that it shares characteristics of the memoir and fiction but does not actually belong to those genres (Geertz in Behar, "Ethnography in a Time..." 145-146). Since the push for new forms of ethnography that shake off shameful imperialist, colonial ties, it has experienced considerable changes: Self-reflexivity and confessional accounts of the researcher during fieldwork has become commonplace, no longer are the

ethnographer's personal narratives during fieldwork considered "trivial and inconsequential"; globalization, advancements in technology, transportation, and telecommunication, as well as an explosive increase in migratory movements have made it highly unlikely for ethnographers to find isolated communities where they could immerse themselves in a single site of study, and what has taken its place is a "de-territorialized", "multi-site" ethnography that traces, observes, and follows groups of people as they move through different settings that make up their "life worlds"; the ethnographic subject's role has also shifted from "primitive to subject to native to informant to interlocutor to, ultimately, co-author" (Van Maanen). There is also a much larger body of ethnographic writing that tries to keep its rhetoric unburdened by jargon and elevated abstractions, and maintains a particular aversion to theory-laden discourse. This latter development has made it possible for ethnographic writing to be less restricted and able to lend itself more towards borrowing an increasing number of literary techniques from the humanities to present its findings (Van Maanen; Tsao). Norman Denzin describes his vision of an ethnography of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as:

...an ethnography which refuses abstractions and high theory. It is a way of being in the world that avoids jargon and huge chunks of data. It celebrates the local, the sacred, and the act of constructing meaning. Viewing culture as a complex process of improvisation, it seeks to understand how people enact and construct meaning in their daily lives. It celebrates autoethnography, the personal account, mystories, myth and folklore. (401)

What Denzin describes in this passage is greatly similar to the approach that Behar professes to take when she writes: "I approach ethnography as a form of blurred-genre writing that mixes reportage with memoir, travel writing, theoretical reflection, accounts of dramatic encounters, the storytelling techniques of fiction, and sometimes even the lyricism of poetry. Since, for me, ethnography is most of all a method for converting lived experience

into memorable, even beautiful, writing...(Behar, "Ethnography and the Book..." 18).

With this trend in ethnographic writing, the inevitable concern with its being scholarly enough arises once again. Ruthelle Josselson and Amia Lieblich raised the question of what a story should possess to cross over to being scholarship, and answered it with: the story had to move beyond narrative into a conceptual mode. Herb Childress takes up this idea and, paraphrasing Richardson, posits that "all well-told stories have a conceptual structure—there has to be a framework under all that data, whether the data is presented by Joan Didion or Studs Terkel or Henry Glassie, or else the data just remains the unreadable chaos we started with in our field notes." The difference, he says, is that a storyteller employs the framework to "build narrative links, to give direction and emotional weight to the story" while a qualitative researcher will use the stories—or snippets of quotes—as support for presentation of the framework (Childress 251; Prahlad 24).

To further blur the lines between "the 'fictions' of writers and the 'facts' of social scientists," Phillips states how "...close inspection reveals that the differences are perhaps not as profound as one might initially think. ...both fiction writers and social scientists discover things, make things up, observe reality, and invent alternative realities" (quoted in Aggarwal 15) —points that have been recognized in *Writing Culture* and demonstrated in the various forms of writings contained within *Women Writing Culture*.

The cultural critic Clifford Geertz, in the mid-1980s, was urging practitioners and writers of ethnography to recognize a "wider literary movement...which uses some of the storytelling techniques of fiction to write about actual events..." This movement was the New Journalism being promoted by Tom Wolfe in the 60s and early 70s and has since then spread its influence in different forms of writing (Narayan, "Tools..." 130).



One literary genre, more than the others, shares ethnography's esteem for the exemplary research skills of the writer and actually recommends that the writers actually become "instant authorities on the subject of their articles or books. They must not only understand the facts and report them using quotes by authorities, they must also see beyond them to discover their underlying meaning, and they must dramatize that meaning in an interesting, evocative, informative way..." (Cheney 1).

Creative Nonfiction, although the name sounds contradictory, employs the techniques of fiction to relay facts in a way that is designed to move the reader. Like the task of the ethnographer who wishes to tell a story that will resonate to a large audience, the creative nonfiction writer relays the facts, but has to "become more than a transcriber of life's factual experiences" (Miller and Paola viii). This type of writing cannot afford to become boring, for the motivation behind using literary techniques in relaying information is to "capture and describe a subject" so well that the reader cannot help but be interested and be compelled to find out more (Gutkind cited in Caulley 427). This goal of making the facts evocative and interesting forms the basis for Behar's recommendation that "ethnography must be done with grace, with precision, with an eye for telling detail, an ear for insight that comes unexpectedly, with a tremendous respect for language...with a love for beauty—especially beauty in places where it is not looked for" (Behar, *Ethnography: Cherishing...* 477).

Creative nonfiction, as has been mentioned, draws from the techniques of fiction and there is a "long history of anthropologists who have also written fiction..." (Narayan, "Tools..." 131). Techniques used in the presentation of facts in creative nonfiction may help enrich the writing of ethnography.

**TOOLS IN CREATIVE NONFICTION  
FOR USE IN LITERARY ETHNOGRAPHY**

*Story and Situation*

The act of sifting through and making sense of gathered data to find the narrative is something that both writers of Creative Nonfiction and Literary Ethnography have to do. Gornick suggests three elements to look for in analysis: story, situation and the persona (quoted in Narayan, "Tools..." 132).

In Creative Nonfiction, situation refers to the circumstances affecting the movement and development of the characters, while "the story is the emotional experience...the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say". To be able to turn a situation into a story, persona is needed to "serve the insight" needed to "organize the writing" (Gornick quoted in Narayan, "Tools..." 132). These three elements could be seen working together in "My Name", a fiction piece included in the short story collection by Sandra Cisneros entitled, *The House On Mango Street*:

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing.

It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse—which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female-but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong. My great-grandmother. I would've liked to have known her, a wild, horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. That's the way he did it.

And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window.

At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver, not quite as thick as sister's name Magdalena—which is uglier than mine. Magdalena who at least- -can come home and become Nenny. But I am always Esperanza. would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do. (26)

In this short fiction piece we see the situation of Esperanza, a young Mexican girl who, we can infer, is probably an immigrant, since people at school say her name "funny" and are unable to pronounce it properly. She was named after her grandmother, who was born in the year of the horse, as she also was. Her grandmother was a strong woman, but was forced into marriage by her husband—a decision that didn't make her happy, as the "looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow." Esperanza, as the persona, rejects the future mapped out for her as the inheritor of her grandmother's name and, possibly, fate of yearning for life "outside the window". Her story lies in her rebellion against a future similar to her grandmother's and hopes that by changing her name she may also be able to change her fate.

Narayan appropriates these three elements for ethnography: "Situation as the site of fieldwork, personal circumstances, the historical social circumstances, and prevailing

theories about the subject of research; the story as the kinds of transformations that an ethnographer experiences, witnesses in others, or comprehends intellectually" ("Tools" 132). Transforming a situation into a story, would be the persona—the ethnographer—and the way he or she writes and positions himself or herself in the text. Observe how these three elements come into play as we encounter another female named Esperanza in an excerpt from Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman*:

It was in 1983, during the Day of the Dead, that I first came face to face with Esperanza in the town cemetery while I was busy taking photographs. I kept snapping away at the sight of the tombstones people were lavishly decorating with the yellow and orange marigolds known as zempazuichiles. The dead are said to cherish the aroma of things. Between frames, I caught sight of Esperanza. She was striking. She held a bulging bouquet of calla lilies and seemed to me like something out of one of Diego Rivera's epic Indian women canvases. As I drew closer, I asked if I might take her picture. She looked at me haughtily and asked me, with a brusqueness I had not encountered before among local women, why I wanted to photograph her. I made some weak reply, and she let me photograph her, though I was so nervous that I snapped the last picture on the roll (which, in the end, didn't come out) and moved on, certain that I would have little more to do with her. I think that many of the contradictions of my work with Esperanza were dramatized in that first encounter. I jumped on her as an alluring image of Mexican womanhood, ready to create my own exotic portrait of her, but the image turned around and spoke back to me, questioning my project and daring me to carry it out. (4)

Behar has entered her field site and had her first personal encounter with the participant in her study, Esperanza. She has

already constructed an image of how working with Esperanza would be, but the Mexican woman refused to conform to Behar's image of her, and even forced Behar to defend herself and her project.

This distinction between situation and story can explain why two ethnographers may come out highlighting two different stories though they may be given the same field site and situation (Narayan, "Tools" 132).

#### *Character*

Dragon made His first appearance in *el norte* as an ink stamp on the wooden cartons that came up from the hills of Sinaloa. He showed up again after World War II, traveling on burlap sacks from Mexico, maybe Turkey. Then He came stuffed into duffle bags from Southeast Asia. He seems to like northern New Mexico, this beast, for He has made the journey again and again — even from such far-away places as Burma, Afghanistan, and Colombia.

He's here now, in fact, strutting through the halls of Española Valley High School, riding the backs of polyester shirts. (Glendinning 1-2)

These are the opening paragraphs in Chellis Glendinning's book, *Chiva*, which incorporates the issue of global heroin trafficking, its effects on a small town, the personal lives of particular inhabitants of the town, along with the author's romantic involvement with one of the townsfolk.

The reader's interest is piqued from the start in several ways: the introduction of a character, Dragon, and the subsequent use of a capital letter in the pronoun "His" when referred to—a feature we usually see used on powerful or influential characters; details about the possible setting (*el norte*); and the breadth of his influence that he comes up stamped on boxes. Is he a person? The name of a company? A product?

This excerpts also illustrates two techniques in effective characterization: Describing by means of action and being able to give insight into the narrator's character.

Describing characters by the way they move e.g. "made his first appearance", "came stuffed into duffel bags", "strutting through the halls". This is what Stein calls, "characterized through an action" (42). And as we proceed along the beginning paragraphs, we get the voice of the narrator—knowledgeable, observant, a bit dead-pan, but her use of the word "beast" to refer to the Dragon somehow gives us a hint of negative feelings—revulsion or anger perhaps?

Narratives are populated by flat and round characters. Flat characters are caricatures and exhibit a single idea or quality, while round characters have inner complexity, moral dilemmas, and the capacity for surprising transformations. In fiction, characters are built through such techniques as describing their physical peculiarities, habitual mannerisms, opinions they express, and ways they act" (Narayan, "Tools" 135).

As ethnographers who build their own persona, it would seem wise to employ the flat type of characterization as it would seem tricky and self-indulgent to portray oneself as a round character (Narayan, "Tools" 135).

*Scene and Exposition.*

Scene involves being adept at the use of several tools of writing like dialogue, description, timing, specificity of detail, point-of-view "to write about one continuous action in essentially one place by essentially the same people" (Cheney 27; Miller 136). Cheney likens it to the lens of the camera coming in on sharp focus on the characters and recording every telling, pertinent detail, action and or dialogue. Let us look at a scene from Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman*:

David has prepared a wad of dollar bills  
and holds them tightly in his hand as the guard

motions us away from the Customs Office and asks him to open the trunk. I am sitting in the back seat with Gabriel and start to open the door, but the guard tells me I can stay in the car. This is something to be handled between the men. I sit with my fingers crossed and ask Gabriel to be very quiet. Why am I afraid? I feel as if anything can happen.

There is a hierarchy among the guards: the one in the red cap, an underling, calls over the other two. They all peer inside the trunk; the head guard tells the capped guards what to shuffle around and then asks a few questions about where we're going and what we're doing. "We're tourists," David tells them, pretending not to know Spanish...Then the guard in the red cap bustles around to the front of the car to paste on the tourist sticker.

"Ay, dame algo también," he says. David hands him a dollar, and we're off again, but now we're on the other side. (227-228)

Cheney, Miller and Paola, as well as Caulley cannot stress enough the importance of scene to creative writing. They describe it as "the basic building blocks of creative nonfiction". Cheney draws attention to how scene manages to "make the past present" and involves the reader in such a way that it's as if the events were happening right in front of his or her eyes (54).

In this scene written by Behar, we are immediately drawn into events by focusing on a specific action—David holding money in his hands. Notice, however, how the detail that he held the money "tightly" served to communicate the tension present in the situation. Suspense piles up when Behar is ordered to stay put, and the next paragraph is a detailed account containing a brief observation on the power structure among the guards and how they paw through the family's things. Tension escalates as the readers are let in on a secret: that David is pretending not to know Spanish. When the guards paste the sticker on the vehicle

and wave the family through, we feel as relieved as Behar that they've left the border guards and have proceeded to the other side.

Events laid out as scenes stand out. They ask the readers to come in and see events unfolding before them.

It is most often the case, though, that not all events in a narrative requires "showing" through scene. Sometimes, especially when you want to indicate the passage of time over a long period, it is advisable to use exposition, for this is one of the characteristics of exposition, that it "compresses time" (Cheney). Note how exposition, "telling rather than showing" is utilized in *Translated Woman* to relay events that happened through most of Esperanza's lifetime.

During the long period of her mother's illness, Esperanza began to work as a peddler. She considered it embarrassing to sell in the town where people knew her and decided to sell in San Luis instead. Eventually she found her path: to be a *marchanta*, peddling flowers and vegetables door to door. In the city, where no one knew her past, she could become another person, a friendly and engaging "India María" figure catering to middle-class housewives. Her ability to sell and earn her own money gave her confidence, and Esperanza now makes a decent living as a self-employed marketing woman on the margins of the capitalist economy, surviving independently of a husband.

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Three years after leaving Julio's house, Esperanza began a relationship with a man ten years younger than she. Consciously, it seems to me, she decided she would no longer be anybody's woman nor anyone's wife. Selecting as her lover



a much younger man was already a strong statement of her growing freedom to let desire come before duty. She chose not to live with her lover, the guard Jorge, but she did have three children with him. As she puts it, "I wasn't washing his clothes," and so she neither expected her lover to be loyal to her nor to support her. Nor, in turn, did she feel she had to mourn at his grave. (288)

The events contained in these passages have taken place over the space of many years, and mapping them all out as scenes may have the story run the danger of becoming tedious, or lose a point it wants to make entirely.

Cheney advises writers to master the rendering of both scene and exposition. A good writer will inevitably make use of both, and knowing which things are best laid out in scenes and which are "joined or separated...by summary" takes planning, practice, and good judgment.

*Using Real-life, Telling Details.*

This is a way of establishing credibility through details that may be familiar to readers because they are part of their everyday reality.

Back to cans: do you know what "Ligo" means? Have a little respect for what you eat, folks, and read the label. It means "Liberty Gold"—at least it did, originally.

"Ligo" retained its special place in my undergraduate heart. In the early 70s, when there was always some rally or other to go to in the afternoon—which meant we had to fortify ourselves with a decent lunch—my fellow Maoists and I repaired to the rear of Vinzons Hall in Diliman, climbed over the wall, and crossed the street to what everyone called the "Balara Hilton". It was a ramshackle *carinderia* with wire-mesh windows,

and its blue-plate special was a can of Ligo, opened by the chef and sautéed right before your very eyes in the finest traditions of Hong Kong's seafood restaurants. All this was dumped into a bowl to go with a plate of steaming rice, for P2.50. Sorry, no Visa or Master Card.

During my first visit to the US in 1980, I walked a mile across cornfields, past white picket fences, to find an Asian food store in the middle of the freezing Midwest, there to load myself up with—you guessed it—Ligo. I had a small cache of the same in my luggage when I flew to Scotland last September (I was through with walking and foraging, I said to myself). Am I glad that 747 didn't blow up; the whole cabin would've smelled like anchovies.

Those of you who don't understand this Pinoy passion for canned sardines have to know that, in many corners of this archipelago, Ligo's as good as gold. Don't be miffed when a farmer or fisherman in the boonies opens a can for you, his special guest from the Big City, instead of broiling you some of that luscious tuna he's feeding his dogs. He's offering you the most highly-prized item on the rural menu, short of corned beef: that's right, canned sardines.

Dalisay originally wrote this piece as part of a column that comes out regularly in a Philippine newspaper. Here he talks of a particular brand of sardines that is familiar to most Filipinos, and furthers the description by associating the object to memories and particular experiences that he makes the reader respond to—either because they have experienced it for themselves or, even if they haven't, they can imagine living through it from the provided details.

*Sticking to the facts.*

Lee Gutkind, editor of the journal *Creative Nonfiction*, has this to say about being true to the data you've unearthed during research: "Creative nonfiction demands spontaneity and an imaginative approach, while remaining true to the validity and integrity of the information it contains. . . .The importance of providing accurate information cannot be overemphasized: Names, dates, places, descriptions, quotations may not be created or altered for any reason, at any time" (cited in Caulley 444). He also sets a code for writers of nonfiction to adhere to if they want to retain the integrity and validity of their work as non-fiction and the product of research. The first of these is to always aim for the truth. Ascertain the accuracy and honesty of your writing, and, as much as limitations and quirks of memory will allow you to, maintain that the "narrative is true to your memory". Second is to learn that "recollected conversation" and "fabricated dialogue" are different. If you are uncertain as to how people were thinking during a particular time, it is best to ask them than to assume or make things up. It is always best to ask people how they felt or what they were thinking during a certain event when you are conducting an interview, so you may instead be able to use these as quotes. Thirdly, actual conversations tend to ramble and have a lot of inconsequential utterances. If you do want to "compress" dialogue, do "member checks" to make sure that what you have written is still what the speaker meant to say. Lastly, even if you hardly compressed dialogue, do member checks anyway. This is "a criterion of rigor that involves feeding back to the people what you have written about them to see if you have accurately represented them and their words. They are able to correct any mistakes you have made or to reconsider anything they have said.

These are some of the more important techniques to be considered and mastered when writing literary ethnography. In learning these techniques and employing them to be able to make the writing read well, ethnography will be able to reach a wider audience, and share its discoveries and insights to more people. It also comes closer to Norman Denzin's concept of a "literary

ethnography” that exhibits a “mastery of literary craftsmanship, the art of good writing. It should present a well-plotted, compelling, but minimalist narrative, based on realistic, natural conversation, with a focus on memorable, recognizable characters” (403).

One last thing to ruminate on is Behar’s point that the first things to become outdated in the field of ethnographic study are the theories. She goes on to illustrate this by explaining that:

As paradigms shift, an ethnography that once was a cutting edge demonstration of the merits of a theory of structural-functionalism, or a theory of social drama, or a theory of communities, quickly loses its punch. What remain valuable in ethnographies after their theories become stale are precisely those aspects of lived experience that the ethnographer’s theory could not harness, could not squeeze into the box. Long after the theoretical platforms of ethnographies have been superseded, what still makes them interesting as texts are the chronicles they offer of a society observed in a given historical moment; and the *û*ctions they often unwittingly embrace, the *û*ction of who the ethnographer thought she/he was in the *û*eld, the *û*ction of how that society was constructed by the ethnographer, whether harmoniously or con*û*ictively, depending on the nuances of the ethnographer’s sensibility and the historical moment in which the ethnographer happened to be present as an observer. (“Ethnography and the Book” 19)

If this is the case, then what ethnography should do to maintain its health is to ensure that the accounts written on ethnographic studies present memorable stories—stories that are accessible to people beyond academic circles and “work that is artistically satisfying” (34).

Ethnography continues to undergo exciting changes and practitioners to experiment and push boundaries. Its development and expansion into other fields of study aside from the social sciences prompts the recommendation for future studies to be undertaken in order to fill in the gaps made by ones such as this article.

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