

FOREWORD

Fifteen years ago. I remember the moment vividly. Like it was today. The first time I introduced my personal voice into my anthropology. My son Gabriel had just celebrated his first birthday. I was soon to turn thirty and in the second year of a postdoctoral fellowship. We were living on the corner of McKinley Street in a rented house painted forest-green. The wooden floors were old and warped and we had no rugs to cover them. I had a room where I wrote and dreamed of writing in ways I couldn't write. A deadline was coming up: I needed to prepare a paper for the annual American anthropology conference. But I was finding it hard to write. I was still grieving over the loss of my beloved maternal grandfather, who had passed away over the summer while I was doing research in Spain.

Knowing my grandfather was dying, I had returned to the small village in Spain where I had done my dissertation work, carrying the weight of guilt and uncertainty on my shoulders. Ironically, my reason for going to Spain was to carry out research on attitudes toward death. Even though I'd lived in the village for twenty months, I'd never asked people to tell me stories about death. The research would form the basis of the paper I needed to present for a panel on attitudes toward death in rural Europe.

Shortly before the end of my trip, my grandfather died in Miami Beach. I was overwhelmed with feelings of loss, grief, rage, and moral confusion. Why had I been in Spain talking with strangers about death rather than being at my grandfather's side gently offering my last good-bye? Why was it that over the course of my work as an anthropologist I had become an expert on popular Catholicism and could recite the rosary in Spanish by heart, but I knew nothing of Jewish mourning rituals and had no idea how to honor my grandfather within the traditions of my own heritage?

These questions haunted me, but it wasn't until I began struggling to write my paper for the conference that I realized they needed to be addressed in the very same context as my presentation of my research findings about how Spanish villagers felt about the subject of death. In fact, as I wrote, it quickly became clear to me that what I had come to know about death in Spain had been learned in the space of my grandfather's dying. In turn, hearing stories of sorrow and loss in a small village in Spain had prepared my heart for the ache of death's merciless finality.

With a sense of urgency and necessity, I prepared my paper, and when it came time to read it aloud before my colleagues, I trembled in fear, convinced that I would receive a scolding for speaking so personally and so emotionally at an anthropology conference. I don't doubt that there were people in the room who were made to feel uncomfortable by my presentation, but I didn't notice. I did see that the room fell silent as I spoke and that people were listening. Several colleagues were kind enough to tell me they were moved to tears by my paper. That was all the encouragement I needed. Over the next several months I expanded the paper and turned it into an essay, "Death and Memory," which became the opening piece of my book, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (1997).

After writing that essay, there was no turning back for me. I wanted to approach anthropology with an opening heart. I wanted to treat intersubjectivity not only as a theory but as a fundamental part of the representation of social reality. And I wanted, maybe most importantly, to discover the deep conjunctures that inform any effort to know the world beyond the self. I'd come to realize that in writing "Death and Memory" I'd mixed together levels of experience that are not usually mixed. I'd created a counterpoint, a *contrapunteo*, between the ethnographic stories of death in rural Spain, which required my objective presence as an anthropologist, and my own grandfather's death in Miami Beach, which had taken place in my pained absence. This unique convergence, with all its friction, poignancy, and contradiction, had a certain musicality, I thought. It conveyed a faith in the surrealist principle that joining together incongruous things could bring about an unexpected awareness, a slant of crooked, sharp light, the most sublime montage, an edgy form of knowing that dared to surprise the knower too. That was what I liked best about this method: that you yourself, the knower, didn't know fully what you knew until you wrote it down, until you told the story with yourself included in it.

Of course, at the time, I didn't know how to describe what I was doing. I kept using this *contrapunteo* in my writing but assumed it was my own

particular idiosyncrasy that was leading me to produce work that didn't fit the classical norms of academic writing. I had no idea, at first, the extent to which my voice was part of a mosaic of voices, which in time would create a vigorous and unsettling interdisciplinary intellectual movement.

I thought I was doing what I was doing because I was too sentimental, or because I was melodramatic, or because I was a frustrated poet, or because I was Cuban and suffered from that terrible Cuban malaise of exceptionalism, or because I was an emigrant and so was always uneasy about my bearings, or because I was the first person in my family to receive an advanced degree and so had to write in ways that my mother could understand, or because I was selfish and wanted everything to connect back to me somehow, or because I was an imposter who'd slipped into the academy through the back door and couldn't do "proper" academic work.

As it turns out, I was not acting out of the needs of my particular ego and personal history but fulfilling my role as a historical actor within an intellectual community that I was helping to create. The entire time I thought I was writing personally, I was actually writing collectively, forming part of the zeitgeist of my time and my generation.

Can it be an accident that the desire which overtook a wide range of American scholars trained in a variety of academic disciplines to write in newly meaningful ways, which refused anonymity and authority and instead sought connection, intimacy, and passion, came as the century was ending? Might it be that all of us, in our respective disciplines, without knowing it, were grappling with the crisis of how to cross the border between the twentieth century and the twenty-first? Were we making history or running from history? I believe we wrote in innocence, from our hearts, and it was a good thing we did so, as if we had intuited how much we were going to need those well-turned hearts in the century to come.

This anthology of autobiographic writing by scholars with a range of ties to the academy, this mosaic of brave, graceful, and compassionate voices, skillfully edited by Diane P. Freedman and Olivia Frey, bears testimony to the strength of an intellectual movement that is changing the way scholarship is being done. Freedman and Frey have brought together people in numerous fields, including literature, music, film, history, anthropology, law, medicine, mathematics, and the natural sciences. They have consciously blurred the illusory line between "hard" and "soft" disciplines. And they have selected forms of first-person writing that are diverse and compelling, never predictable, and at times simply delightful, as when the composer Peter Hamlin offers an easy and delicious recipe for peanut sauce while

describing the process of making music. And yet like all anthologies, this book asserts the importance of a common project, a shared commitment to a way of knowing as well as a way of telling.

What exactly is that common project and why does it matter? Having been asked to write a foreword for this volume, I accepted the honor, viewing it as an opportunity to examine how so many of us arrived at this destination. How to describe where we are? Let's says it's an odd and uncharted location, where another kind of truth must be confronted, a location where it would be the worst betrayal and irresponsibility not to confront the intersection of who we are and what we study.

Looked at as a whole, this volume reflects an overall sense of exasperation and frustration with classical forms of uncovering and relaying knowledge. Yet, while there is general agreement that the old paradigms are exhausted, new paradigms have yet to be enshrined. Or more exactly, there is strong resistance to enshrining any paradigms at all. We seem to be a group of scholars who are committed for various reasons to demystifying the intellectual process, to showing how we know what we know and making that comprehensible to the uninitiated. A new epistemology is what we're after, but we might not use that word. We have an aversion to big words and abstractions. We've all at some time been made to feel alien in the academy and consider it a principle of our work that our writing will not be a tool for the alienation of others. We seek, with Brechtian flair, to make our writing accessible to the carpenters who build our cedar decks and the secretaries who sort our mail. At the very least, many of us think it might be nice if our colleagues in other departments could read and understand and perhaps even enjoy what we write. Some of us, too, have attachments to the communities we come from and would be unable to sleep at night if we felt the writing we did was a wall that shut out those who take the greatest pride in our accomplishments. We refuse to classify what we do under the narrow categories of disciplines, even as we continue to labor within those disciplines where we continually confront the taboos against our supposedly self-indulgent pursuits. We are not afraid to take risks. We think it is totally possible to do rigorous scholarship and be personal and personable in our work. We deplore stuffiness and choose to write concretely in the everyday poetry of our speaking voices. Our thinking is not separated from our feeling. We aim, not to put forth heavy arguments, but to move others with our angel-winged words. We have a primitive faith in the power of a story well told. But we ourselves are very sophisticated. We are storytellers with Ph.D.s and academic jobs. We've studied hard and been

rewarded for our efforts, but we're not totally satisfied. We are the velvet exiles of the academy, able to comfortably do the work expected of us, but choosing instead the more difficult position, that of the outsider within. The academy would be a dull and complacent place without us. But we aren't merely critics of the academy; most of all, we are chroniclers of the historical moment in which it has been our destiny to be thinkers.

We should not ignore the fact that our intellectual movement, like the memoir boom in general, seems to have taken off primarily in the United States. I am sure that a serious scholar of American culture could provide insight into the particular features of the culture that have inspired such an intense desire to make the personal matter in our intellectual pursuits. Perhaps this concern for the personal in scholarship is rooted in good old American individualism with which we are all too familiar. But it's individualism with a decidedly new twist, as we struggle to understand what happens to the uniqueness of the person in the midst of ever more expansive technologies that make unprecedented demands on our humanity.

Our new world order draws us closer to one another but leaves each of us in peril of becoming ever more anonymous, ever more identified with our social security numbers and our frequent flyer numbers and our e-mail addresses. Such anonymity, I would add, is the price of privilege; the sadder anonymity, the truly painful vulnerability, is that of the large populations around the world mired in hunger, poverty, oblivion, and underdevelopment. And yet despite the finer quality of life for the privileged few, humanity has never been so fragile, so susceptible to massive car crashes and explosions and the killing hatred of the excluded, so susceptible to cruel illnesses like AIDS and cancer, so susceptible to the nasty fallout of an environment that we ourselves have damaged more relentlessly in the past century than in the thousands of years that preceded our existence on this planet. In the United States, we are bombarded daily with too much knowledge to process and too many choices to make about everything, from the shampoo we use to the music we listen to in the silence of the night. In this era of information overload and media saturation, we keep abreast of strife, suffering, and yearnings for liberation in nations scattered about the globe, but compassion fatigue threatens constantly to drain us of sympathy for the struggles of others.

Increasing anonymity, increasing suffering, increasing uncertainty, increasing recognition of too many far-away others who cannot be helped all at once—surely this must weigh on the psyches of the various American intellectuals included in this book, who have chosen deep, critical self-

examination, not as an escape from the complexities of the world we live in, but as a way of being more present in this world.

We have arrived in a new century. Wearing our hearts on our sleeves. Yes, that is good. But how much more difficult it is to speak now! But speak we must. There is already, for me at least, a growing sadness as I come to sense that the personal voices we worked so hard to find in our scholarship are rapidly going to have to find another tonality in order for them not to seem frivolous or coy or irrelevant. This is leading many to say that now is the time to return to the detached voice of authority of the past. But that will only give us a false security. I say that more than ever what we are going to need are the strong personal voices we have cultivated, separately and in unison, as outsiders within the academy. I have faith that our voices will rise to the challenges that the future holds.

More than ever, scholarship must cherish the fierce beauty of humanity. More than ever, love must shine in our learning—the love of being able to be there, to fathom what we didn't know before. And then the love of trusting that the words will come to enable us to say what we now know. Trusting that the words will surely come.

—Ruth Behar

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