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Special Issue

The Art of Ethnography: Narrative Style as a Research Method

Compiled and Edited by Russell Leigh Sharman

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Introductory Foreword

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At the 2006 American Anthropological Association's Annual Meeting in San Jose, California, a session titled "The Art of Ethnography: Narrative Style as a Research Method" brought together the authors of the articles in this special issue to discuss the creative process of ethnographic research and writing. The Society for Humanistic Anthropology was the ideal sponsor for the invited session, and its journal, *Anthropology and Humanism,* is the perfect venue for an expanded discussion of the issues raised during the session. Each of the articles in this special issue speaks to the art of ethnography and the inherent creativity of participant-observation, and each in their own way argues for a complementary creativity in narrative style that would expand the influence of the discipline.

I am pleased to report that, in the process of fleshing out their ideas, the authors found points of connection beyond the overall theme of creativity. Several of the authors turn to the same exemplary ethnographies, such as Sidney Mintz's *Worker in the Cane* (1960) and Piers Vitebsky's *Reindeer People* (2005) for inspiration, and most borrow ideas from writers outside the discipline, such as Francine Prose. Moreover, all of the authors approach their theme with warmth and creativity, leading us into better ethnography by example, and they share a bit of themselves along the way. I am more than pleased to present their articles in the pages to follow and greatly honored to count myself among their number.

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Style Matters: Ethnography as Method and Genre

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SUMMARY *This article examines the potential for narrative style to reposition experience as central to the anthropological project. A disciplinary dichotomy between form and substance in ethnographic writing has privileged a discursive turn away from lived experience, the bedrock of ethnographic data. Drawing on the insights of experimental ethnography and pragmatist philosophy, this article critiques this dichotomy, arguing for the methodological importance of narrative style in ethnographic writing both as an evocation of fieldwork experience and as an act of authentic political engagement. This article will draw on examples from the author's work in Costa Rica and New York City.* [Keywords: ethnography, narrative, style, experience, creativity]

"Listen, I'm gonna tell you something . . ."

Sunny stood behind the counter of his all-night deli gesticulating with a metal spatula. Overhead, a patina of grease and smoke covered handmade signs announcing menu items, and a small television hardwired to the New York Lottery channel displayed winning numbers. It was past midnight and the narrow space, tucked between a subway entrance and a pool hall on a busy avenue in Brooklyn, was filling up. The patrons were coming in less and less sober, barking orders at Sunny. He took it all in stride, placating impatience with a gap-toothed grin, a practiced banter, and an infectious hiccupping chuckle that sounded disarmingly similar to that of Popeye the Sailor Man.

He spoke of his travels from Ramallah to South America to Italy to New York. He spoke of his struggle to keep peace in his deli amidst the crush of drunk patrons. He spoke of his plans to retire. Someday. Then he turned back to the grill, expertly managing several orders at once with an entertaining habit of flicking his free hand to the beat of his spatula and the Arabic music overhead.

My wife Cheryl and I were a few months into a year-long ethnography of nightshift workers in New York City (Sharman and Sharman in press). We knew Sunny fairly well by then, having visited his deli several times, usually between the hours of midnight and 4:00 a.m. We would order a turkey burger or falafel and settle in at the counter to chat about the business, the neighborhood, his past, and ours. He was tired, always tired. Just like all of the other nightshift workers we interviewed. But he had adjusted, he'd learned to live with fatigue, acclimating to a life out of phase with his family and the city around him.

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We were not so skilled at this adaptation. The unnatural hues of artificial light in delis, diners, train stations, and hospitals seemed to sap whatever energy we got from unhealthy doses of caffeine. Eating meals after midnight left us sluggish and soft. We hadn't seen many of our friends in weeks, unable to accommodate their dayshift schedules. We were tired, always tired, and we had not adjusted.

Eventually, the fieldwork wound down, and we shifted slowly back to a diurnal schedule to begin the writing. We had hours of tape and pages of field notes all pointing to the effects of a global incessant economy on migration, kinship, class, gender, and health. We noticed connections between nightshift labor and worker safety. And we had plenty of evidence that the post-industrial urban economy was further segmenting the labor market across the 24-hour cycle.

We also had trouble sleeping. We found it difficult to share the sidewalks with the crowds of people moving about during the day. The experience of sleep deprivation was still fresh, as was the subversive thrill of staying up when most were sound asleep. Carried by the inertia of experience, the doing of ethnography was buffeting the writing, shaping it into an evocation of sights and sounds and smells, the *feel* of New York at night. "Listen, I'm gonna tell you something," Sunny said. And it had as much to do with what he said as how his free hand bounced to the beat of his spatula, how the crush of alcohol-soaked customers shouted orders between obscenities, how the low hum and greenish hue of the fluorescent lights covered us all in a bleary, late-night malaise.

Ethnography is both a method and a genre. It describes what we do as well as what we write. The method is rooted in experience—that of field informants as well as that of the ethnographer. The genre, unfortunately, often uproots experience and grafts it onto academic discourse, where it can too easily wither. This essay examines the potential for narrative style in ethnographic writing to reposition experience as central to the anthropological project. The art of ethnography is to evoke the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feel of a place, connecting audience to field informants through ethnographer.

Style Matters

Paul Stoller, in his book *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* (1989), argued for the art of ethnography almost 20 years ago. Of course, he wasn't the only champion of the cause. James Clifford and George Marcus made the connection between ethnography and literary art explicit, suggesting that "literary processes—metaphor, figuration, narrative—affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered" and that "the making of ethnography is artisanal, tied to the worldly work of writing" (1986:4, 6). Stoller (1989) and Clifford and Marcus (1986), along with Margery Wolf (1992), Ruth Behar (1993), and many others, challenged the conventions of ethnographic writing and opened up new ways to "write a people." But the feminist and then post-modernist critiques—in both theory and practice—merely exposed what was always true about ethnography: that at its most basic, it is the telling of stories with all of the epistemological and political complexities that implies.

In practice, the discipline seems to have largely ignored this call to tasteful ethnography. Anthropologists continue to beat ethnography senseless, violently separating discourse from experience. The aesthetics of ethnography, its style, is secondary if not excluded altogether. In fact, stylistic flourishes that seek to evoke that primary experience, especially those that borrow from other genres such as fiction or poetry, may be quietly applauded, but they are suspect—a distraction from analysis and theory building.

But if the method informs the genre, then style matters. "Doing" ethnography requires intimacy, vulnerability, warmth, and honesty. It requires a patient commitment to connect with our informants, our "audience" in the field, to build rapport and establish trust. It requires a practiced flexibility, a willingness to borrow from foreign styles of communication, to meet our informants more than halfway. It may mean learning a new language, or simply learning which hand to offer in greeting, when not to enter a room, when to speak, what to eat or how to sing (even if we cringe at the sound of our own voice). In the field, we must be willing, at all times, to stretch ourselves, to be uncomfortable.

If we wrote our analyses the way we pursue our fieldwork, we would produce richly textured evocations of experience with the same intimacy, vulnerability, warmth, and honesty. Our written work would exhibit the same commitment to connect with our audience, that is, our readers, to build rapport and establish trust. We would be willing to meet our readers more than halfway, to learn new styles of communication, to stretch ourselves, to be uncomfortable.

Yet too often we drain the life out of our research through our prose—the very life that made the research possible in the first place. The bone and blood of experience is laid down in black and white on the page—the flesh becomes word and we lose all of our senses. We become the brutish colonizer, demanding our readers to learn our language, to conform to an intransigent academic style that privileges intellectual over emotional commitment.

If we pursued our fieldwork the way we often write our analyses—with dry rhetoric and lifeless arguments—we would never find anyone willing to talk to us.

The Anti-Kantian Aesthetic

Part of the problem lies in our tendency to view raw qualitative data as ungovernable save through the discipline of certain academic conventions. We are inheritors of a post-Enlightenment fear of the aesthetic and what Alain Locke described as the "uniformitarian criterion of logic" (Harris 1989:38). The experience of ethnographic research cannot be *evoked,* it must be *subdued* by writing. At base, it is a hegemonic project maintained by an academic discourse that operates only on the intellect—Platonic in its mistrust of the senses and emotions not because they are unimportant, but because they are dangerous and can too easily lead us away from enlightened—disinterested—rationalism.

This fear of the aesthetic begins with Plato, but finds fullest expression in Descartes and his followers. Despite a few correctives from British Romantic philosophy, the Cartesian revolution effectively hijacked the concept of aesthetics, most pointedly through Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1968). For Kant, aesthetic experience, that is, the unmediated sensory perception of the world, is inherently subjective and must pertain strictly to judgments of taste. To preserve its unmediated quality, aesthetic judgments must be disassociated with any functional utility, that is, they must be "disinterested." The extraction of the object of contemplation from any association with its relationship to the body (i.e., its usefulness in everyday life or as a material means to an end) was central to the Kantian concept of aesthetics.

But over the last century there has been an alternate, pragmatist strain of aesthetic philosophy that reexamines the cornerstone of disembodiment set in place by Kant. Critical to this project is the pragmatist view of experience, which reasserts the importance of the body and the senses in the production of knowledge. Experience is "double-barrelled," in the words of William James, because it "recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality" (Dewey 1958:8).

John Dewey sought to recover "the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living" (1958:10). This recovery required a distinction between the undifferentiated flow of time, and "*an* experience" where "the material experienced runs its course to fulfilment" (Dewey 1934:35). *An* experience, in pragmatist terms, stands out and "carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency" (1934:35). It is this self-sufficiency, this completeness, of *an* experience that makes it fundamentally aesthetic, and not necessarily because it is pleasurable, but because some small bit of experience has become *known* in the double-barrelled sense of both subject and object. Contra Plato, Dewey directly implicates the senses in this process. For Dewey, sense refers to "the meaning of things present in immediate experience," (1934:22) and as such was fundamental to a new, anti-Kantian aesthetic philosophy.

It is this emphasis on experience, and in particular the notion of *an* experience, that clears a path for ethnography to reclaim its connection to aesthetics, to evoke rather than subdue. For ethnography, as both method and genre, seeks to *know* the world in that double-barrelled sense of both subject and object. It recognizes that the most seemingly banal activity can carry with it its own completeness, a self-sufficiency that contains the "meaning of things present in immediate experience." Fieldwork is full of these moments, these experiences that shape an individual's being-in-the-world. To "do" ethnography is to wade into that anti-Kantian aesthetic, to be keenly *interested* in one's experience. Writing ethnography should exhaust every technique to offer nothing less.

Wisdom Sits in Places

There are in fact many splendid examples of anti-Kantian ethnography, in which the doing and the writing combine to produce an effective and affecting account of being-in-the-world. Sensual ethnographies such as João Biehl's *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* (2005) or Kirin Narayan's *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels* (1989, not to mention her novel *Love, Stars, and All That*, 2002) or Piers Vitebsky's *The Reindeer People* (2005) position experience at the center of their work, both in the field and on the page.

Keith Basso's account of place-making among the Western Apache is another. In his slim, masterful book, *Wisdom Sits in Places* (1996), Basso draws on four decades of fieldwork to explore how Western Apache link language and landscape to create "place-worlds." Using discrete, place-specific narratives of past events, the Apache produce extended metaphors that connect the wisdom of ancestors to contemporary moral problems through the rocks, rivers, hills, and valleys of their physical surroundings. Or as Basso eloquently describes it: "With words, a massive physical presence is fashioned into a meaningful human universe" (1996:40).

The stories, historical tales known in Apache as *'ágodzaahí,* follow a particular structure and are recounted by elder "place-makers" to address specific concerns, usually related to the behavior of fellow Apache. In one example, a young Apache woman who had been away at boarding school attended a ceremony inappropriately dressed. Rather than directly admonish her, an elder woman, her grandmother, simply told a story. "It happened at Men Stand Above Here and There," she began, and then narrated the history of an Apache policeman who "acted too much like a whiteman." The young woman left, embarrassed, and the grandmother told Basso, "I shot her with an arrow." Later, as Basso was driving the young woman home from a trading post, she explained how the story her grandmother told deeply affected her, causing her to abandon the influences of boarding school and the outside world. As they passed the site of the story, the place called "Men Stand above Here and There," the young woman said, "I know that place. It stalks me everyday" (1996:57).

The narratives and their material settings provide a tangible orientation to the meaning of things among the Western Apache. They are rooted in experience, both in their connection to the landscape and in their contextual enactment by place-makers. As such, they are fundamentally pragmatist and inherently ethnographic. Basso's explanation deserves ample space here:

> Weakly empirical, thinly chronological, and rarely written down, Western Apache history as practiced by Apaches advances no theories, tests no hypotheses, and offers no general models. What it does instead, and likely has done for centuries, is fashion possible worlds, give them expressive shape, and present them for contemplation as images of the past that can deepen and enlarge awareness of the present. In the country of the past, as Apaches like to explore it, the place-maker is an indispensable guide.
>
> And this in a powerful sense. For the place-maker's main objective is to speak the past into being, to summon it with words and give it dramatic form, to *produce* experience by forging ancestral worlds in which others can participate and readily lose themselves. [Basso 1996:32]

While contemporary ethnography differs from Western Apache history in some important ways—it is strongly empirical and, following my thesis, always written down—there are some striking similarities. As ethnographers we are "place-makers" fashioning possible worlds from the vagaries of fieldwork, summoning it with words, hopefully giving it dramatic form so as to *produce* an experience in which others can participate. At its best, ethnography is revelatory in its evocation of experience, tying it to the landscape through powerfully and carefully crafted language.

Among the Faithful

Experience and its evocation can be revelatory in its consummation of the "meaning of things," as it is in Basso's sensitive account of Western Apache place-making. But it can also be revelatory in its failure. Ethnography, fraught with the difficulties of communication and interpersonal style, can be a humiliating experience. But humiliation itself can settle into *an* experience, complete and self-sustaining in its ability to expose something crucial to being-in-the-world.

So it was for me one day in August 2005.

It was near dusk on a lonely road three kilometers uphill from Pacayas, a small town in the highland Costa Rican province of Cartago. I was waiting next to the fence I built just a few months earlier with the help of my neighbor, Manuel. He lived in a small house just 50 meters up the road with his wife, Maria, and their two grown children.

For the past several years, I'd been interested in the adoration of a 20-centimeter stone statue of the Virgin Mary that appeared to a part-African girl in 1635. The icon is now the patroness of Costa Rica, *La Virgen de los Ángeles,* also known as *La Negrita* (Sharman 2006a). Over time I had achieved a certain intimacy with the cult of the icon, become a kind of honorary member of the altar guild, and was given special privileges during masses in her honor.

Among the many performances of the Virgin's adoration there is an annual pilgrimage, *La Romería,* to her basilica in Cartago, a city of approximately 100,000. In the days leading up to her feast day on August 2nd, the faithful make their way toward the highland city from as far away as Nicaragua and Panama. I had made the pilgrimage several times before, usually from San José, the most popular route, and usually with my dear friend Rosita, who introduced me to *La Negrita* many years earlier. But this year I wanted to experience the walk from the rural countryside. Manuel, my neighbor, agreed to walk the 20 kilometers with me.

As I waved to a few passing pilgrims, Manuel appeared.

"*¿Listo?*" he asked. He had his hands in his back pockets, and a sly smile appeared under his moustache.

Yes, I was ready. And so was he. He had showered, combed his curly black hair back, and put on a new pair of jeans. His customary rubber boots were gone, and it was strange to see him standing in a pair of leather shoes. They seemed at least a size too big for him, but Maria insisted he wear them for the journey to the basilica.

We began the steep descent down into Cartago, passing and being passed by other pilgrims along the way. Far below us the patchwork fields of potato, broccoli, and onion tumbled into a wide valley that channeled a wide river, the Reventazón, east toward Limon province and the Caribbean sea. We had not gone far before I realized I brought too much gear. Manuel eyed my camera bag, knowing it would be too much for the long walk, and insisted we share the burden. I felt foolish, but after years of fieldwork, that was a familiar feeling. I was only partly consoled by the fact that Manuel was already regretting his choice of footwear.

Night descended, and with each small town or clique of houses we passed, we were joined by more pilgrims. Manuel and I kept our own pace, occasionally chatting about this or that and occasionally falling into long stretches of silence. But every few kilometers, he would ask, "*¿No quieres descansar,* Russell?" I was tired, and yes, I did want to rest, but I didn't want to slow him down. I didn't want to interfere with how he experienced the pilgrimage, so I always answered that I would rest when he did.

He would smile and just keep walking.

A bit past the halfway mark, the little highway from Pacayas joined a much larger road that rose from Cartago up to the crater of Irazú, a dormant volcano that towers over the region. At the crossroads, a whitewashed statue of Jesus, his heart exposed and painted a brilliant red, stood with arms outstretched over the passing pilgrims. The local Red Cross had set up a rest station there, and many were sprawled around the base of the statue taking in water and munching on snacks for sale along the way. Manuel and I looked at each other, by now our routine of asking if the other wanted to rest had become nonverbal, a raise of the eyebrows and a subtle nod. We shrugged and continued walking.

The last several kilometers was a steep descent surrounded by thousands of other pilgrims. The trickle of fellow travelers from Pacayas had become a river from the towns higher up the volcano. Manuel admitted his feet had rubbed raw in the oversized shoes, and he was developing a limp. I had never known him to complain, so it must have been worse than he let on. I had long since lost the conscious control of my legs, one foot just kept slamming down in front of the other. I wasn't sure I could stop if I wanted to. Every joint was sore, and I secretly cursed the children who mocked my pain with their seemingly boundless energy over the long trek.

When the road finally leveled off, carrying us into Cartago, we were exhausted, bleary-eyed and ready for the end. The road had become jammed with pilgrims, a thick, slow procession through the outskirts of the city. Manuel and I looked in wonder at the colored lights, the fireworks, the street vendors, finally spilling out into the wide brick plaza in front of the gleaming basilica.

Thousands of pilgrims streamed into the basilica, and thousands more streamed out. It was a smooth operation, quickly and efficiently moving the faithful inside and up to the altar where the icon stood waiting, then back out into the plaza. But there were two ways in. One on your knees and one on foot.

I turned to Manuel, "*¿Como quieres entrar?*" He explained that he usually entered on his knees, but that I could go in on foot if I wanted. We could meet up afterward. I raised my eyebrows, gave a subtle nod. He shrugged and we both headed for the same entrance.

As we inched forward, the interior of the basilica came into view. It was bathed in a warm yellow light, illuminating the stained wood interior that rose high above the cold, ceramic tile floor. Two dozen tall columns marked off a hundred meters of open space leading to a gilded altar and the enshrined icon. Just ahead, another line of pilgrims dropped to their knees and began the arduous final stretch slowly swaying back and forth as they moved one knee in front of the other.

Then it was our turn. Manuel and I dropped down at the threshold. I hoped the shooting pain I felt the moment my knees hit the hard floor was simply the shock of no longer being on my feet. I slid one knee forward, then the other. The pain got worse. I looked over at Manuel, a blank face, no sign of suffering. I looked at those around me, an elderly woman, a young couple, a child, all eyes forward, every face serene. I was five meters inside the basilica, and the pain was unbearable. I calculated the distance to the altar and figured both kneecaps would have to be replaced before I reached the first set of columns.

I closed my eyes, swallowed hard, and stood up.

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Manuel looked up and smiled a forgiving smile. I picked my way through the other pilgrims, whispering an awkward *pardon* or *con permiso,* finally making it to the thin rope that divided those on foot from the truly faithful. I shrunk into the crowd, moving slowly to the altar and back out again. I was ethnographically embarrassed, personally humiliated.

Typically, this is the kind of story that is discreetly omitted from analysis. It may not even make it into field notes. But it is also precisely the kind of experience that can settle into *an* experience, distilling the meaning of things *because* it is painful and awkward and embarrassing. This did not become clear to me until later that evening.

Manuel and I eventually found each other again in the crowds outside the basilica. He gave me a firm slap on the back and a broad smile. I asked if it hurt. Yes, he said. It hurt. And somewhere in the back of my mind a voice completed his thought, "The trick is not minding that it hurt." We moved away from the crowd, I leading him down a few side streets to the home of my friend Rosita. I had left my car at her house earlier that day to make our return journey a bit less arduous.

Rosita lives in a quiet, solidly middle-class neighborhood not far from the basilica. Her husband, Jaime, a retired engineer, still makes a good living translating technical documents for overseas firms. When we arrived at the house, they of course invited us in to rest before returning to Pacayas. A few other friends were there, just returned from the pilgrimage themselves, and everyone was just sitting down to fresh *pozole,* a pork and hominy stew.

Manuel and I found places around the table, and I shared stories of our journey. There was some laughter, and a few glasses of whiskey poured around the table. But Manuel was silent, only the flicker of a shy smile. He barely touched his pozole and politely refused offers of a drink. He fixed his eyes on a spot on the table and waited patiently for me to finish so we could leave.

And then I understood. In as much as I felt out of place among the faithful trudging down the aisle of the basilica, Manuel felt out of place around Rosita's table. I recalled the many times Rosita described men like Manuel, men of the land, as simple—honest, noble even, but backward. No one at the table would let on, but they all knew their place.

Later, in the car ride back up the volcano, Manuel brightened. We spoke easily, commenting on how strange it was to be passing the same route so effortlessly now. But I was still smarting from embarrassment, first for my 11th-hour weakness at the basilica, and then for putting Manuel in such an uncomfortable position at Rosita's. As he carefully removed his shoe in the passenger seat of my car, rubbing his raw and aching foot, I realized we both had passed through *an* experience. It impinged on us differently, but was no less powerful for its completeness, its ability to show us something true about ourselves and the world around us.

The Politics of Prose

In ethnography, doing and writing are coterminous and mutually constituting—one informs the other and both are creative acts rooted in experience. That is precisely why style, as an evocation of experience, matters. But this is much more than simply a plea for better writing. It is a plea to make good on the promise of a more engaged anthropology. The same critics who called for a more reflexively literary ethnography confronted us with the fact that we are unavoidably engaged or implicated by the nature of our work. And by and large, as a discipline, we've accepted the premise that the intimacy of ethnographic research demands a political commitment. Analysis as polemic is now commonplace.

And, yet, too often it seems that the end of exposing and deconstructing inequality justifies the means of erecting a discursive scaffolding around the very people for whom we presume to advocate. Arguments become disembodied, senseless, and like so many Kantian judgments, *disinterested* (and, perhaps, the greater tragedy, *uninteresting*). Driven by the fear of the aesthetic, we fastidiously subdue rather than evoke experience with language.

This approach is not only patronizing and arrogant, it is ineffective. If there is any hope of adding social justice to the anthropological project, of making good on the promise of political engagement, it lies in the fact that ethnography is fundamentally inductive and radically empirical. Theory is critical, but it must be built up, not handed down. By allowing theory to run roughshod over experience, we risk losing the empirical basis of our argument. What's worse, we also risk alienating the non-specialist who may be in the best position to affect change. If our audience consists of the uninitiated (and I would argue that if we are honest about our agenda it certainly should), then we should engage them in the same experiences that engaged us. In short, truly inductive research should produce persuasively narrative ethnographies.

Worker in the Cane

Sidney Mintz seems to have understood this fundamental principle when he set down Taso's life history in his book *Worker in the Cane* (1960) half a century ago. Produced over several years in Puerto Rico, the book is a collaboration between Mintz and his good friend Taso, a laborer, union organizer, and eventually, Pentecostal convert. It is also an example in the extreme of the above argument. The text is essentially one long interview transcript, interrupted only briefly here and there by Mintz's own voice, usually providing some historical context for Taso's narrative. Like a good Apache historical tale, *Worker in the Cane* "advances no theories, tests no hypotheses, and offers no general models" (Basso 1996:32), but it does fashion a world that challenges conventional, systemic inequality. Through Taso's own words, and a handful of Mintz's, we get a detailed analysis of American imperialism and the proletarianization of peasant labor in the rural Puerto Rican agrarian economy. We see these changes permeate all levels of social life from kinship, marriage, and sexuality to theories of illness and religious performance. The brilliance of the work is that we get all of this through the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of Taso's experience.

Mintz knows he has very little to add to this persuasive narrative because his own ideas about the political economy of rural agrarianism came less from reading political economists than it did from sitting and talking with Taso. As Mintz himself explains:

> It was my hope that the remarkable intelligence and articulateness of the protagonist—a man who had very little formal education, and had lived a very hard

> life—would reveal itself successfully to the interested reader, and thus illuminate the immense human potential, often unrealized, that lies outside our reach because our social and economic system often destroys individual capacities before they can blossom. I have no fully confident belief that I succeeded in my intent; but I am entirely certain that my friend, Taso, in telling his own story, did. This remains, and is more than ever, his book. [Mintz 1960:xii]

This is not the typical false humility one finds in opening remarks. It is an authentic response to *an* experience that shaped the meaning of things first for Taso and then for Mintz. Taso understands, intimately, that "in Puerto Rico, as long as the worker struggles the way he is struggling now, he will always fail." He knows, better than Mintz, that divisions among the workers lead to victories for the corporations. "That's where corporations win their objective," Taso explains, "when the worker is like that—confused, not knowing where to go, to one side or the other" (1960:200). Mintz is wise enough to let Taso do the talking, approaching the book the way he approached his fieldwork to produce a powerfully persuasive document that speaks truth to power in the clear voice of his informant rather than the mumblings of jargon and academic convention.

The Tenants of East Harlem

What is remarkable about Mintz and Taso's eminently readable text is how much it has to say without having to say very much of it. Mintz's politically engaged, radically empirical ethnography is an example, in the extreme, of allowing experience to speak for itself. There are, of course, plenty of highly effective, beautifully written ethnographies that offer persuasive analyses and sophisticated theory-building without sacrificing experience (I've mentioned a few already). But my first book-length ethnography owes everything to Mintz.

I moved into East Harlem in 1999 with no intention of writing anything down. My "area," so to speak, was Costa Rica, my home was in East Harlem. It did not take long to see the folly of trying to turn off the ethnographic impulse. As Costa Rica became more and more like home, East Harlem was becoming more and more my "area" and the boundaries between either or both seemed fuzzy at best. So I set about the task of making sense of what I was experiencing as a newcomer to a neighborhood of newcomers since it was founded in the northeast corner of Manhattan a few centuries ago.

That work eventually became *The Tenants of East Harlem* (2006b), seven life histories of seven residents of East Harlem, myself included. There is Pete, one of the last holdouts from Italian Harlem along Pleasant Avenue, José, a second-generation Puerto Rican from 106th Street, the heart of Spanish Harlem, and Lucille, an African American near the Fifth Avenue boundary of the "real" Harlem. The other stories came from newer arrivals, Maria, an undocumented Mexican national, Mohamed, a West African small business owner, Si Zhi, a Chinese immigrant and landlord, and myself, the unintentional vanguard of gentrification. Each of their stories connects to the larger narratives of urban planning, economic development (or lack thereof), immigration, transnationalism, and ethnic succession. But each of their stories is also *their* story, and I was inspired by Mintz and Taso to get out of the way of their telling of it.

I was also intent on allowing the narrative style of the writing to reflect the character of the conversations. By evoking the setting, the rhythm and cadence of the speaker's voice, the feel of the place, I hoped to immerse myself and the text in the sensory world that shaped their stories. I had a hunch that if my preconceived ideas about the political economy of urban life had any empirical validity, my informants would know them better than I did.

I was not disappointed. In one conversation with Mohamed, a West African store owner, he explained the evolution of his political opinion in regard to poverty and government assistance: "I remember when I came to this country, when it comes to jobs and such, I was more like a Republican. You know, everyone should stand on their own. But when I started my own business, that's when I realized that it's not going to work in this country. Some people just need help."

With a shake of his head, Mohamed says, "Government assistance is really necessary." After a weary, contrite sigh, he adds, "My God, I really do believe that now" (Sharman 2006b:155). Mohamed's words, because they are rooted in his experience, are so much more persuasive than my own.

In attending to the experiences of my informants by trying to reproduce their sense of place (and produce one for myself), I trusted the ethnography to do the work of theoretical abstraction. If they talked about politics, I read and wrote about the politics of that moment. If they discussed housing, I read and wrote about housing changes in that era. There are gaps to be sure, but through the stories of my neighbors we learn that poverty *and* gentrification are the result of macro-economic forces and institutional and environmental racism rather than simply individual rational choice; that race and gender are both individually constructed and socially constrained; that ethnic identity exerts a powerful constraint on individual agency, but is not monolithic; and that urban space is an interpretive field, open to a mutually constitutive process of meaning production. But we learn these ethnographic things by living in them, coming face to face with the real world through real people. And we communicate them best, not by abstraction, but by evocation, inviting our audience "to discover something new" (Stoller 1989).

Ethnography as Method and Genre

"The weekend is very tough for me, man," said Sunny. It was dawn, Sunday, several months later, and Sunny was seated at one of his own tables, an open Heineken in front of him. "You see, on the weekends, there's too much stress."

We were nearing the end of our field research into nightshift labor in New York City. We had spent long, dark hours in every borough talking with workers who rarely saw the sun but kept the city moving for the rest of us day dwellers.

"I make a retirement plan for myself," Sunny explained. "I don't want to think about the government giving me the tax—$1,000 or $1,400 a month. You think I'm gonna wait until I'm sixty-three years old to get a $1,500 check? I don't think so. All the Arabic are like this. Fifty years old, already millionaire." Sunny hopes to follow that path, especially after years of toiling on the nightshift for customers he still finds difficult to understand and even harder to respect. "I'm forty-two, if I'm not a millionaire when I get to fifty years old, I'm gonna go burn myself."

"What do you think?" he asked, motioning to the empty tables and his well-worn counter. "Working hard like this?"

That moment, and countless others over the previous year, crystallized something critically important about our work on the nightshift. If we hoped to convey anything approaching the reality of life in the darkness of the global incessant economy, we would have to evoke it sensually. It would not suffice to simply tell the reader how difficult the nightshift can be, we would have to show them, invite them in, produce *an* experience that allows them to share that space. We would have to be place-makers, shooting our readers with stories, that they might say, "I know that place. It stalks me everyday."

For the doing and the writing of ethnography are coterminous and mutually constituting, requiring a sensual, creative approach to both. Style matters because how we communicate is as important as what we have to say. We must, as a discipline, face our fear of the aesthetic, and wade into experience as our only hope of making good on the promise of a more engaged anthropology. If our ideas have merit, if they are rooted in the lives of our informants, if they are born out of the drudge and joy of fieldwork, then they will manifest in an honest and intimate narrative.

Notes

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