

BEHAR'S VULNERABLE WRITING AS A TEXTUAL STRATEGY IN ETHNOGRAPHY

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Introduction

The breakout of literature following Clifford Geertz's interventions in hermeneutic anthropology has forced anthropology to become concerned with the way in which anthropological texts are consolidated and crafted. Geertz anticipated and accelerated this movement, but the initial concern for the process of constructing narratives in anthropology was initiated by Bronisław Malinowski, who explained at length the importance of note-taking in fieldwork and the necessity to narrate the *imponderabilia* of everyday life. From this point on, anthropology's focus shifted from simply inserting oneself into a field situation (a novelty brought about by Malinowski's school) to telling self-reflexive stories as part of a pedagogical dissemination program for prepared audiences. Who says 'story-telling' implies the adjacent textual strategies in ethnography, that is, the way in which anthropological discourse is determined on the basis of first-person accounts. Anthropology had to invent methods to couch frameworks of cultural concepts in a net of value-laden languages and prepare for their critical interpretation. The object of this article is to show the salient qualities of the literary strategies which are used by anthropologists as witness accounts of their experience and as tools for directed thesis-making.

Textual strategies address a plethora of issues: style, narration, symbol-placement and interpretation, usage of metaphor, pitch and tone, as well as the underlying political agenda of the piece in question. Textual strategies are vehicles of expression that carry and project the framework of analysis, which is intended to signify the author's claim to truth and to validate his world view. They embed irreconcilable signs and reorder the portrait of the landscape to further semiotic signification. Most importantly, they actualize the referents and give meaning to the deep structure of the holistic picture established by the narrator. Textual strategies are ways by which authors organize their narrations to address particular audiences. They may seem to be quick fixes used to assemble a series of

axioms, but in reality they represent long thought-out expressions of philosophical positions. When examining textual strategies, one ought to pay attention to their structure, but also to their evolution: textual strategies mutate in the course of a narration and become more or less embellished depending on the economy of the argument.

Writing strategies refer to literary aspects of thought-constitution. On the surface they may point to ornamental surface elements, but in reality they channel deeper issues in creative and meaning-producing ways, driving ideas with a literary twist, not shying away from being a punch. In this sense, it would be appropriate to say that textual strategies determine the accent of expression, the intimate flair and texture, with which the text is enunciated – *le timbre* of its auctorial voice. Textual strategies can be deconstructed into semiotic or stylistic elements, but in reality it is their consolidation as an assembled unit that projects the discursive meaning. The coherence of the message can be evaluated by the unity of orientation of the constituent parts. Where there is no synchrony, the message is disjoint, excessive or *aigu*, this in itself being a stylistic quality used to further advance the notions in place, or to show rupture or disharmony.

Definition of the ethnographic genre

Before discussing the literary aspects of the ethnographic genre, a definition is in order. Ethnographies refer to the cultural and literary artefacts that are produced and disseminated by anthropological inquiry. They are accounts of field experience, most often told in the first person to inform a network of concerned readers about the general and intimate details of an experience of immersion in a society or cultural group outside one's own. General details, which explain the setting and circumstances of the cultural aspects being examined. Intimate details, which are necessary to bring the outsider inside the writer's point of view and establish authority, as well as a glimpse of the anthropologist's sense of self, identity and integrity.

Ethnographies are texts. '*Textus*' in Latin means 'woven fabrics'. In anthropology texts are made up of strands and patchworks of cultural signs, assembled to convey ideas about customs and ways of life of natives. To that extent, they are imbued with discursive and literary qualities. They are nests for stories, which are deployed rhetorically to advance learning and establish the bearings of intellectual positions.

Ethnographies are usually partly descriptive of the context in which the anthropologist finds his subjects in order to project the coordinates of his inquiry. An example of such writing can be found in this excerpt, where the author explains the alluring contours of a beach, as if ‘exhaling’ steam in its unique tropical climate. As can be seen in this passage, words are crafted with agility, carved to point beyond the rainbow of hues and values on the multidimensional spectrum of a word-canvas:

Hills are often shrouded in trailing mist, whilst white clouds brood or race over the sea, breaking up the monotony of saturated, stiff blue and green. To someone not acquainted with the South Sea landscape it is difficult to convey the permanent impression of smiling festiveness, the alluring clearness of the beach, fringed by jungle trees and palms, skirted by white foam and blue sea, above it the slopes ascending in rich, stiff folds of dark and light green, piebald and shaded over towards the summit by steamy, tropical mists. (Malinowski, *Argonauts*)

This excerpt from Malinowski shows the deep layer of *littérature* involved in crafting the tableau of impressions. Malinowski started the trend to become involved with the subject of his study in a personalized fashion and to channel his observations with style, which since then has determined the aesthetics of the ethnographic genre. Another example of the vivid descriptions in Malinowski is that of the mountain of Koyatabu, which exports the reader to Egyptian hypertextual interpretations, with pyramids, sphynxes and cupolas cutting through the ‘ribbon’ of the watercourse, which plunges deep into the sea. Words are alive, with meaning imported from other traditions and arranged in an exotic and diverse fusion which brings the senses alive:

On the main island of Fergusson, overlooking the Amphletts from the South, and ascending straight out of the sea in a slim and graceful pyramid lies the tall mountain of Koyatabu, the highest peak on the island. Its big, green surface is cut in half by the white ribbon of a watercourse, starting almost half-way up and running down to the sea. Scattered under the lea of Koyatabu are the numerous smaller and bigger islands of the Amphlett Archipelago — steep, rocky hills, shaped into pyramids, sphynxes and cupolas, the whole a strange and picturesque assemblage of characteristic forms. (Malinowski 1922: 46)

Descriptions in ethnographies range from subtle and/or rigid outlines of indigenous life to vivid, romantic, ‘bloody facts’, to quote the Ancestral Father of ethnography. The

gradation of romanticism is what attributes (some) aesthetic qualities to ethnographies, when the context is coupled with underlying elements of exoticism.

It should not be lost in translation that the purpose of ethnographies is to deploy an understanding of the customs and rituals of an indigenous group. The point of inserting oneself in a faraway society is to extract data from its bustling heart in a fashion synchronous with ethics, taking into consideration, however, the fact that the ‘gaze’ of the anthropologist is always a penetrating gaze which tries to ‘export’ something from a local place in a sometimes ‘violent’ fashion, like stealing fire, while placing it under cover in a protective bundle.

Ethnographies are underscored by the writing style of the anthropologist and can be political. For example, it has been said that Malinowski’s mischievous utterances about indigenous people brought about a ‘mysterious transformation’ in Science that has actually painted the indigenous people as the most intelligent, dignified and conscientious natives known to the West (Geertz 1967, quoted in Payne 1981: 438)). By doing this, Malinowski has conferred leverage on the indigenous people, even though this might not have been achieved if his comments were taken at face value. Another political ethnography of the auto-ethnographic type is Ruth Behar’s *Vulnerable Observer*, in which the author validates the plight of subaltern people in her own voice, but as an in-group member of that community, in a self-revealing and endearing fashion. I return to Behar’s work at some length below.

Ethnographies have for a very long time been travelogues, written in the first person to account for travels and experiences of alterity in faraway lands. Malinowski’s intimate journal is one such example of a travelogue. Michel Leiris gives another fascinating example of a travelogue of his journeys in central Africa in *Afrique Fantôme* (1934). Travelogues are important because they convey the intimacy of the first-person account and provide information additional to research which is of valuable interest for the manner in which anthropologists are implicated in their work of detachment and contact. Travelogues, however, are not only diaries, but can take shape in the form of other genres of literature, such as novels. As an example of this, I could cite Georges Condominas’s self-referenced work on a Vietnamese tribe effectuated in the 1950s, under the title *We have eaten the forest* (1977), which is largely focused on the plight of a participant

observer telling his story in his own words amid gorgeous and vivid descriptions of scenery in the Southeast Asian jungle. It becomes clear that the distinctions between the diaries, travelogues and self-centred autobiographical novels of social scientists in displacement provide lines for contestation and interpretation, making the point that indeed they are a 'blurred genre' because one can never understand fully when one has escaped the methodical approach to immerse oneself in the personalized account. The lines are thin, and the different forms of writing are arranged and cut across boundaries to form new literary prisms of points of view.

Ethnographic crude realism vs. the 'artifices' of embellished pure literature.

The ethnographic genre has one fundamental quality which makes it unique: it lies with its 'crude realism', used to advance knowledge and provide the most effective descriptive strategies possible for rendering the reality of the fieldwork. This realism triumphs over the *artifices* of pure embellished literature. It is raw, expressive, crude. It shocks in the way it denudes reality, *dérobant* its identity of superfluous detail to go to the heart of the matter. This textual strategy brings us closer the theatre of the drama at hand: one begins to feel that they truly exist in a jungle, or steppe, or desert. This crude realism is expressed through admissions of depression and internal mental states, including feelings of extreme infatuation, love, passion, sexuality in different forms (including his pawing of Neolithic women and White Residents' wives), addictions, or abrupt repetitive notes concerning having visited the *chiottes*.

It becomes unclear how we move from objective science to feeling at the other end of this continuum, the all-pervasive 'sweetness in the belly' that Camilla Gibb (2006) links with the nostalgic, *synésthésie*-filled descriptions contained within a given culture-laden literary plot (all the while keeping in mind that her anthropological world is based on female circumcision, war, tribalism and politics). The 'sweetness in the belly' actually represents this highly developed realism in its pointed reference-making to something beyond our senses which mathematical gridlines cannot capture, but which is real and which this new science ascends to understanding. It is not an empty set of words: it has currency! A qualified expression about an experience lived by someone who participated in a fantastic faraway world, it is something to which we all can refer from our own post-

national plural associations in culture, at least partially, because it builds on our meaning-producing experience and relationship to suffering and existence.

The clash between scientific inquiry and literary subjectivity

As insinuated, however, textual strategies are characterized by an internal tension, namely the clash between scientific inquiry and literary subjectivity. At the very root, Western civilization has faced this discourse in Kant, who determined intuition, imaginative reproduction and conceptual recognition as elements of experience that ought to be tested empirically for validity. (Kant, *Critique de la Raison Pure*, in Makreel 1990: 27).

Furthermore, Piaget's epistemological genetics have cited the psychological underpinnings at the basis of a theory of knowledge. Piaget believed that knowledge is a biological function that results from the actions of an individual and is borne out of change and transformation. He also stated that knowledge consists of structures and comes about through the adaptation of these structures with the environment. In the history of anthropology, this *discourse* goes back to Malinowski, whose reflexive writing has been scrutinized for being too revelatory of the sense of self that shaped the author, as well as the rating of his private intimate emotions which exploded as a result of the publication of his diary (1967). Evidence shows that Malinowski was deeply preoccupied with the scientific project and that his *démarche* was underscored by faithfulness to the scientific method, which he treated with as much devotion as hugging his copy of Frazer's *Golden Bough*.

The tension between these two conflicting strands in ethnographic writing emanates from the idealized notion of the scientific project, which would cut off subjectivity from its heart. Science presupposes a degree of inflexibility, rigidity, 'cold love'. Making room for intimate disclosures was an unexpected turn of events, which undermined the rules and presented a great deal of instability in the scientific community, which was not ready to deal with its own (psychoanalytic) shadows and indiscrete utterances. The guttural brooding of Malinowski's journal presented a cancellation of his attempts to emulate the Cartesian *Discourse on Method*.

But there was reason to the madness. The explosive revelations opened up a Pandora's box of new discursive strategies and paved the way for a new methodology in

ethnographic writing. It must not be forgotten that, by becoming self-conscious and aware of its subjectivity, anthropology grew into a deeper social science, one endowed with a human dimension hitherto unforeseen and introspective. It became clear that doing anthropology was not test-tube science, it was imprinted by the human soul and by transient cyclical stagnation, Sisyphian effort and persistence.

Auto-ethnography: Ruth Behar, the Vulnerable Observer

Textual strategies acquire a new sense of immediacy with the ethnographic outputs produced by Ruth Behar. Focused on sharing her 'breaking heart' through literature that spills over into the subjective realm, Behar is a pioneer who adapts earlier autobiographical elements of Malinowski's diaries. These include putting the 'self' into the centre of one's research, as if one were to make it into the 'Who's Who' of World Literature, noting one's development through interactions with the Other, as well as with the imponderabilia of everyday life, such as studying habits and customs and not forgetting to do Swedish gymnastics, keeping a diary to record one's scientific, that is, cultural progress, living, reacting and writing about life without failing to contextualize one's emotions, and using the diary as a cushion for one's psychoanalytic adventure through the oceans and the deeper journey into the meaning of oneself. In being creative, Behar appeals to our sense of emotions by providing a topography of her developing affective phases in life and their resultant motion towards adulthood in anthropological research. Anthropology for Behar is like a voyage through a 'tunnel', 'giv[ing] up the possibility of imagining other worlds through fiction' and 'surrendering to the intractableness of reality' (2).¹

Anthropology for Behar is closely knitted with writing autobiography. Self is redefined to give place to affects: mourning, loss, memory, desire, fear, angst, defiance:

Loss, mourning, the longing for memory, the desire to enter into the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that is always arriving late, as defiant hindsight, a sense of the utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write something, are the stopping places along the way. (3)

¹ Page numbers alone following quotations are to Behar 1996 unless otherwise stated.

The 'personal' dominates in a powerful way, organizing thought and discursive strategies to posit rhetorically that the absence of the 'intimate' results in incomplete investigations of the project behind the study of man and his antecedents. In essence, these 'personal' statements become the vehicle of a very distinct, unique, passionate voice, searching to put her seal on culture studies and distrusting scientific objectivity, with its distance and lack of personal entanglement with the subject of study, precisely because the 'objective' view colonized and dominated the referential other:

...born of the European colonial impulse to know others in order to lambast them, better manage them, or exalt them, anthropologists have made a vast intellectual cornucopia. (4)

Behar's literary strategies challenge representation in ethnographic writing. They question the core of values of conventional science, calling for the legitimacy of experimentation with the personalized values of sensual touch between self and Other. That touch determines the content of the experience for those authors, and this intimate approach leads to more accurate collection of data in a studied referential out-group, because even though Behar is an in-group member describing a cultural context with which she has familiarity (the Cuban Jewish experience), her specialization in anthropology gives her the distance to be at the same time an out-group member, who sees from above in order to inject new life into old, crusty but antonymically dynamic cultural phenomena. At the end of the day she is 'in', but she is also the 'intruder Other' who is exporting the essence of her adherence to a community of outsiders – her audience.

Just like Malinowski, Behar is autobiographical in her literary approach. She discusses her first major thesis research and its challenges. She deploys stories about immigrant women with whom she interacted and their turmoil over being caught between two worlds ('Marta', etc.). She is herself the centre of her stories, caught between uprootedness and disconnection to community between Eastern Tradition—Sephardic Jewry—and Ashkenazi roots. Obsessed with ghosts from the past (reminiscences of vignettes from her idealistic childhood and the less ideal injury suffered during this period in her life), she analyses her emergence into the intellectual world in a highly individual fashion, wishing to share its essence in a communal celebration, at the same time

conscious of her body image and the projection of body-into-selfhood through the literary, whose fears about the injury are underscored.

The humanism of Behar's writing, coupled with the personalized attitude of autobiography, gives definition to this powerful work, although some have called it 'pathologically gloomy' (Turner 1997). Based on Malinowski's concept of participant observation, Behar crafts textual strategies which emphasize witnessing as the bare bones of social research, with the purpose of 're-scientizing' (like sanitizing) the discipline of anthropology so as not to 'abandon...narrativity for the...rigors of empirical and statistical research' (1996: 164). By doing so and opening up her own strifes with medicine and injury, Behar dynamizes fieldwork in an imperfect and vulnerable way that opens it up to criticism. She insists on a writing that is vulnerable—a self-ethnographical writing which takes us somewhere we couldn't otherwise go and moves us beyond inertia to identify intensely with those one is writing about (1996: 14) Anthropology has always been vexed about the question of vulnerability. Clifford Geertz says:

You don't exactly penetrate another culture, as the masculinist image would have it. You put yourself in its way and it bodies forth and enmeshes you. (Geertz 1995, cited in Behar 1996: 5)

Yes, indeed. But just how far do you let that other culture enmesh? In this example Behar exhibits characteristics of cultural confluence and *métissage*. An anthropologist is not a doctor who sticks a needle in the culture sample, emotion-free and objectively, to isolate the physical components of the substance-matter. An anthropologist lives and becomes overwhelmed by the culture, which he delicately touches and feels with his gaze, or by an *effleurement* in the social and cultural hallways, where self and other interact. This is what Behar implies when she discusses culture enmeshing the anthropologist. Culture represents a web of relationships and the textured, tangled emotions invoked by this process of coming on to another, of seducing the other, of mediating one's space with respect to the space of the other – whether it means that we are stealing it, pushing the other aside or working to maintain distance. Becoming enmeshed in culture signifies being part of a complex process of self-projection into alterity, reception in this place and all the interactions that build bridges of associative instincts, feelings, actions. Being enmeshed

means the pull and push between people, as they react and co-write a narrative of self-portrayal, irrespective of who the writer is. This can be exemplified by the following quote in which Behar explains the filter of self-portrayal that various backgrounds bring to the fore of research. Asserting oneself as a Latina, a gay black man or middle-class woman requires

a keen understanding of what aspects of self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world...Efforts at self-revelation flop not because the personal voice has been used but because it has been poorly used, leaving unscrutinized the connection, intellectual and emotional, between the observer and the observed. (13-14)

This quote explains how subaltern anthropologists had to struggle for acceptance by playing up the salient aspects of their backgrounds, irrespective of whether they were the observer or the observed. Behar attempts to show the dissonance of participant observation, explaining that participation negates integrity to one's point of view:

Our intellectual mission is deeply paradoxical: get the 'native point of view', *pero por favor* without actually 'going native'. Our methodology, defined by the oxymoron 'participant observation', is split at the root: act as a participant, but don't forget to keep your eyes open. (5)

But I think it is clear that a 'participant' does not have to espouse the cultural beliefs of the group whose gestures he is emulating. This point is not ON: participation does not imply agreement with the philosophy of the group who is performing the ritual. So there is no paradox in this position. Getting the native point of view means understanding that one's own point of view is premised on different ontological grounds. It is about bridging gaps through a shared experience of reciprocity and exchange (the 'participation', which is like participating in group play: you play the sport, follow the moves, but you may not agree with the game, nor like the players).

Behar applies a dose of self-deprecating irony to her speech, which solidifies her multi-dimensional portrait, as someone who has a degree of exposure and who is in touch with all her senses, including laughter. This is manifest in passages such as this one, where she pokes fun at the birth-giving of anthropological texts:

Lay down in mud in Columbia. Put your arms around Omaira Sanchez. But when the grant money runs out, or the summer vacation is over, please stand up, dust yourself off, go to your desk, and write down what you saw and heard. Relate it to something that you've read by Marx, Weber, Gramsci, or Geertz and you are on your way to doing anthropology. (5)

The Cuban Jewish author goes far beyond Malinowski in that her note-taking contains her sense of self, her body-related stories linked to the scars that marked her life and traumatized her, the emotional layers that constituted her social and cultural portrait in disarray. Behar offers a writing that is creative about the autobiographical self – informed on the basis of being an in-group member of an exotic cultural position. Unlike Malinowski's diary, her remarks are not *irréfléchis*, disjoint reactions to the world. They are a concerted, patient effort based on acute sensibility to make sense out of the world in which she finds herself now. There is in Behar's writing what we do not see in Malinowski: a search for one's cultural locus, which (over-) determines the human compass in action, thought, self-awareness, maturity and creativity. In comparison to Behar, Malinowski's writing, although flexed on notions of being a world persona, represented a rather dry, automatic type of writing and self-relation. Malinowski did not have a cultural climate which would allow him to be as self-analytical as Behar is, although his statements are often quite acute. Guilt-ridden by the notions of regulated Science, Malinowski initiated the trend that set off Behar, but actually acted in a very self-deprived fashion by today's standards, under-nourishing subjectivity. Behar is Malinowski's total opposite: she wishes to share in a vulnerable fashion all that she knows and has seen, including how she has been slighted and embarrassed, hurt and anguished. Behar believes that this kind of exchange that 'bleeds' with affects will draw a fuller portrait of one's subjectivity conferring on to the reader cultural content which can shape their understanding of place, space, time. Behar does not limit herself by 'rules' of science and authority: she adapts the soft edges of these rules to make a niche for a very unique self-exploratory account of her life as the fusion-experience-being-an-ethnographic-portrait.

Three chief metaphors are contained in her text, as embodiment of this process. The first metaphor addresses the polyphonic character of anthropological research, the idea that anthropology is premised on point of view and that one's perspective of the native's

mentality may be totally divergent from the gaze of a neighbouring onlooker, who would furthermore be influenced by his objectives, background and methodology. To this end, Behar states that the same anthropological subject may be studied from different points of view, which, although diametrically opposed, are ‘both right [being] “different sorts of minds taking hold of different parts of an elephant”’ (1996: 8, quoting Geertz 1995). This metaphor vehicles the immensity of the problem implied by the sheer size of the ‘beast’ under analysis, and the very simple concept that anthropologists attack diverse issues in any single *problématique* and that this results in fragmented interpretations of very similar data, as well as profound distortions if the position of the anthropologist is not clearly outlined in order to circumscribe the locus of thought produced in the encounter.

The second metaphor which appeared very effective – if not aesthetic – in Behar’s argument was the metaphor of subjectivity and its effects. Behar expressed the overlapping of personal space which occurs in reading data, as the anthropologist casts his shadow on his subject by mere contact or approach (the eclipse). To this end, Behar writes:

The exposure of self ... has to be essential to the argument ... it has to move us beyond the eclipse into inertia... (14)

The anthropologist casts his shadow on the subject, but not only. It is important to remember that he casts his shadow on the fragmented but blank slate of the reader, being a sort of filter mediating his experience of the subject. By exposing himself and his inner core, the anthropologist thus influences two subgroups of people: the subjects and the readers. It is the ambition of every such self-exposing anthropologist to overwhelm the reader with his own personalized view of what happened and why it should have stirred everybody’s heart, as opposed to being ‘scientific’ in the traditional sense of the term. It seems that when ‘inertia’ is reached, the anthropologist’s sense of self becomes more important than the initial experience of the native. Such anthropology stops being about the native to be about the anthropologist’s personalized experience (or point of view) of the native. So instead of psychoanalyzing the native, in such writing we witness anthropologists psychoanalyzing their own wounds, conflicts and repressed emotions and bringing them to the table in a collision with ‘data’ (haphazardly: the subject and his

story), which stimulates them to dig further into the past experience. The final product of such writing is what is called an auto-ethnography, which appears to be an anthropologist's brooding self-portrait, based on a reaction at having travelled to some distant place and witnessed the bare bones of culture. I am not sure if this is anthropology or how this changes the future of anthropology in its pure sense because it marks a definite departure from anything we have seen before in the social sciences. Malinowski opened a door with his writing, and now there is a population of anthropologists wanting to share their point of view in this highly subjective manner, so that research moves from studying the native to studying the psyche of the anthropologist presented in a literary culture-studies travel format. I am not sure if we are not totally missing the point. On the other hand, there is value in connecting with these narratives because they allow a common plane for identification and thus evaluation of the anthropologist's perspective, giving cues about value judgments, which until now have been concealed and never admitted to. Exporting these value-laden claims to the forefront of research allows anthropologists to develop a new linguistic platform for the exchange of cultural information with the possibility of creating links that are trans-textual and hybrid between competing experiences. It goes without saying that this forms a sort of very unique literary art, though science is far removed from this project: it exists only as a shade and cannot be fully accounted for.

Behar continues her metaphor by making the case that anthropology is not only about the drama of the subject under analysis, but also of the anthropologist who is involved in a cultural struggle. Anthropology concerns a double-tragedy:

And how might we unsettle expectations by writing about ourselves with more detachment and about others with all the fire and feeling? Can we give both the observer and the observed a chance at tragedy? (18)

As she outlines, there is a conflict between the self-imposed detachment of objectivity, which is expected to characterize anthropological writing, on the one hand, and the acute feeling that descriptions of otherness have to be filled with 'fire' and 'feeling' on the other. Things have not been like that all the time, before Behar. Earlier ethnographies strove to be very clinical in their approach; however, the outburst of subjectivity brought

about by Malinowski's diary influenced this writing and showed that there are indeed advantages to be drawn from sensitivity-filled, 'human' approaches to anthropology. At the beginning anthropology showed customs and rituals, but as we got closer to the matter, it revealed to us conflicts, disappointments, jealousy, betrayal, war. It is also true that the drama of anthropology derives from the fact that it was executed in nations suffering from economic hardship and identity conflict. Hence, the rituals and customs that seemed already complicated have developed a heightened degree of fright, merely because they were the result of social injustices. It was the job of anthropologists to bring these situations to the fore, and by becoming implicated they wrote about their own tragedy, as well as the tragedy of the people under analysis. By becoming implicated in these matters, Ruth Behar questioned authority through her own privileged voyeuristic eye of displacement. She demonstrated that, by giving voice to the subject implicated in the we—they cleavages of social privilege and authority, she was herself becoming implicated in an intimate struggle, which it was crucial to document. In her own eyes, she was heightening her degree of authority by sharing the intimacy derived from being close to the issues, as both an expert and a pioneer. By doing this, Behar was exporting her knowledge by making it accessible outside the Tower of Babel and opening up a new discourse.

The debate between subjectivity and objectivity is something that plagues Behar, although she appears to have sided with the 'subjective' camp. Behar's position is complex because her locus of authority emanates from a heritage of objectivity which has plagued this social science since the times of explorers and missionaries. Behar is not turning her back on subjectivity, but merely recognizing its pitfalls, which are impediments to further research. To substantiate subjectivity, she relies on a quote from Devereux, for whom

Recognizing subjectivity in social observation was a means to a more important end—achieving significant forms of objectivity and therefore truly 'true' science. (6)

Subjectivity, in other words, is a way for science to get 'honest' with the subject matter and with the 'self' of its researcher. It implies that objectivity has been dishonest. This is an important claim, which undoes the fundamentals of social science research.

Subjectivity explodes the 'inner core' of the researcher's psyche, his fundamental secret, which he uses to play games with interpreters.

Moreover, subjectivity is linked to both closeness and distance between the fieldworker and his subjects. The reason why it overwhelms the anthropologist is because all fieldwork is done post-factum, even in the moment that it is written:

An anthropologist's conversations and interactions in the field can never again be exactly reproduced. They are unique, irrecoverable, gone before they happen, always in the past, even when written up in the present tense. (7)

Hence the idea of 'honesty' is tricky because everything is mediated by the personal feelings of the anthropologist, who puts down the intimate imprint of reception and influences the content of collected data. The 'objectivity' of the researcher's memory is also subject to reviews and may be dissimulating false ideas. His state of mind will mark his research, and no matter how he plays his game, he may not in the end be truthful to himself in what he would have seen. Honesty in research is expected, but even in the best of conditions it may not be achieved. On the other hand, if you don't believe the researcher, who will you believe? His position carries the highest authority. Usually the people who become trustworthy observers are the people who narrate stories the best. However, these people run the risk of distorting the information to meet their ulterior motives, or as a result of illusory experiences, which escape discursive strategies. Geertz said it best when he explained that articulating the inarticulable is an impossible way to bridge gaps:

We lack the language to articulate what takes place when we are in fact at work. There seems to be a genre missing. (Geertz 1995: 44, quoted in Behar 1996: 9)

The bottom line is that relating data from the field requires some superhuman powers to channel the needs, expectations and surprises and meet them with the reality of fact. To lift oneself from the abyss of having seen requires strength in directing the information, as if one had been Plato's stargazer. The quality of sight and synthesis required to push forward this agenda remains intricate and is always underscored by subjectivity. But there is a big line of separation between understanding that subjectivity influences writing or research

and introducing human personal stories as vignettes of the anthropological experience. While Behar disagrees, she herself expresses awareness of this fact when she states:

No one objects to autobiography, as such, as a genre in its own right. What bothers critics is the insertion of personal stories into what we have been taught to think of as the analysis of impersonal social fact. [...] The worst sin was to be 'too personal'. (12-13)

It took me a lot of reflection to determine to what extent I support or reject this claim. The acceptance of personal stories in ethnographies is something that appears like a social wrong to many researchers, who do not wish to read the psycho-analytical outpourings of anthropologists at various injustices as anthropology. This is not what they conceive is anthropology. It requires some degree of manipulation to determine which stories are worth holding on to in order to meet political agendas. The idea of being manipulated by moody, capricious Westerner *érudits* in search of adventures skews anthropology as a research area for many such anthropologists, who agree that *some* personal data may be disclosed to make the experience real, but argue that it might be making a false impression to incorporate such data into a holistic written project. Such anthropologists hold their ground in spite of the fact that, as Behar says, vulnerable writing takes a lot of skill:

Writing vulnerably takes as much skill, nuance, and willingness to follow through on all the ramifications of a complicated idea as does writing invulnerably and distantly. (13)

Behar herself admits the pitfalls of such personalized writing:

[W]hen an author has made herself or himself vulnerable, the stakes are higher: a boring self-revelation...is more than embarrassing. It is humiliating. (13)

Opponents of Behar argue that it is not about it being humiliating, but about it being somewhat 'ridiculous', 'immature' and 'a waste of their time', even though she warns that: 'Vulnerability does not mean that anything personal goes' (14). Behar defends herself by claiming that the threat of narcissism imposed on social problems is not significant and that the proper anthropologist may adapt strategies to open up a Pandora's box of unrevealed social problems, which might be constructive to the *problématique*:

[A] personal voice, if creatively used, can lead the reader, not into miniature bubbles of navel-gazing, but into an enormous sea of serious social issues. (14)

Behar's main argument is that, by providing a voyage into the tunnel of the 'self', she provides an identity-based construction of the observer which is necessary in researching *complétude* and quality.

They have poured their own feelings into their construction of me and in that way come to identify with me, or at least their fictional image of who I am. These responses have taught me that when readers take the voyage through anthropology's tunnel it is themselves they must be able to see in the observer who is serving as their guide. (16)

This notion is important if one wants to study the emotional lives of anthropologists as subjects, but it may be rather obsolete when the anthropologist focuses solely on himself to forget his subject of analysis. While it is true that writing vulnerably calls for others to respond vulnerably (Behar 1996: 16), Behar's writing represents a disruption of decorum in the social sciences. It is subversive in that it breaks down the 'face' of social science. Stories from the field about brooding anthropologists can be traumatizing to the subjects who were under their study, as well as to the readers and interpreters of their actions. A detached ethnographic voice seems much more authoritative than an exceedingly emotional personal voice that does not contain its own prejudices.

The final example which influenced my point of view was the description of a conference Behar held with Cuban families contained in *The Vulnerable Observer*. Behar related that these families were found clapping and crying at a conference presentation managed by the author. These surreal, intrusive examples of 'utterings in commotion' are used by Behar to test the envelope, exploding the pressure cooker of expectations. She is communicating that she is such a skilled anthropologist that she can provoke tears by relating to her subjects of study, in that they open up with their *for in time* to show what they've got. Emotion is in the academy and it has its place (ibid.); however, I beg to ask: 'Is it in everyone's interest to reveal one's syphilis to the audience in the room'. In my view, this textual approach, while still unexplored, goes off in directions which render

research to be a somewhat self-defeating adventure, ignoring the wholesomeness and prudence of more detached research.

Conclusion

The emergence of textual strategies from the times of Malinowski's inception of anthropology has led us to consider more novel approaches to ethnographic writing. This article has focused on the vulnerable writing of Ruth Behar as an example of the possible ways in which anthropology makes itself heard among research and literary audiences. The appeal of personalized, subjective literature was analysed for its immediate contact with the reader, its strength and inner power of authority-persons who derived their texts on the basis of fundamental experiences in the field. The guides and interlocutors who shared their affects and hearts made these stories ever-present in our minds. Vulnerable writing, according to Behar, is a holistic approach which promotes others to act vulnerably. According to Behar, there is much to be learned from the honest self-descriptions of live participant observers who relate their stories and their interactions with alterity. This provides a forum for the exchange of ideas and value-laden statements influencing world view. However, Behar's discursive writing goes against the grain in a subversive way by threatening the advantages to be gained from more detached writing in two ways. First of all, it shifts the fundamental focus *away* from the observed. Secondly, it makes it possible for readers to become participant-observers in anthropologists' lives, clipping the occupational distance inherent in observation, and collapsing the skeleton of the *rapport* between the anthropologist and the world as a whole.

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