

# Reading and Doing Ethnography

Social Anthropology 314

# 1.4 Ethnographic Subjects

# Who was the modern ethnographer, by default?

Was he simply a dominant European white man?

- >> Malinowski, in fact, was an emigré from a dominated part of Europe.
- >> Gluckman was Jewish and from Johannesburg.

So was the prototypical modern ethnographer a *dominated man belonging to Europe's intelligentsia*?

# Who is the ethnographer now?

- » Ruth Behar is Cuban-American, partly Jewish.
- » Lila Abu-Lughod is Palestinian (researches Egypt, teaches in New York).
- » Gloria Anzaldúa is Mexican-American (albeit not a professional ethnographer).

So is the new default ethnographer a *racially marked woman belonging to the U.S. intellectual elite*?

# Who gets to be an ethnographer?

Who can identify as an ethnographer?

# Ethnographers in class terms

*"Most anthropologists don't like money and they don't have much of it. It symbolises the world they have rejected for something more authentic elsewhere. It lines them up with the have-nots and against the erosion of cultural diversity by globalisation."*

**— Keith Hart**

(I disagree with this assessment.)

There are different kinds of  
ethnographic subjects

These correspond to different kinds of writing.

# Ethnography & Ruth Behar

- >> Ethnography divides the world into **field** vs. **home**.
- >> You study one place and write in the other.
- >> But this distinction doesn't always work neatly.



*People aren't emotional hemophiliacs  
who you prick and they bleed to death  
in front of you. They can take it better  
than you think.*

— Behar's writing teacher

# Key Informants

*I'm giving it back, so we won't be in your debt. We're so sold out to you that the best we can do is give you one of us to take back with you. No, comadre, don't be worrying about that. I won't ask for anything else, even if I'm dead and dying.*

— **Esperanza (Behar's key informant)**

# Ethnography & Gloria Anzaldúa

*What you or your cultures believe to be true is provisional and depends on a specific perspective. What your eyes, ears, and other physical senses perceive is not the whole picture but ne determined by your core beliefs and prevailing societal assumptions. (542)*

# Nepantla

*Nepantla* is an indigenous word for an in-between space, an intermediate place, a no-place place.

# Categories

*The binaries of colored/white, female/male, mind/body are collapsing. Living in nepantla, the overlapping space between different perceptions and belief systems, you are aware of the changeability of racial, gender, sexual, and other markings rendering the conventional labelings obsolete. Though these markings are outworn and inaccurate, those in power continue using them to single out and negate those who are "different"... (541)*

# Seven stages of conocimiento

1. Safe terrain
2. Nepantla (which you enter by an earthquake)
3. The Coatlicue depths of despair
4. A call to action
5. Making new patterns and stories about your reality
6. Testing your story in the world
7. "You shift realities... and find common ground" (545)

# Letting go of something

*You are no longer who you used to be. As you move from past presuppositions and frames of reference, letting go of former positions, you feel like an orphan, abandoned by all that's familiar. Exposed, naked, disoriented, wounded, uncertain, confused, and conflicted, you're forced to live en la orilla—a razor-sharp edge that fragments you. (547)*

*The life you thought inevitable... is smoke, a mental construction, fabrication. (558)*

# Questions

- >> I would like to know whether Anzaldua takes on the political stance of the Europeans in his writing about "the bridge we call home"?
- >> What advice could Anzaldúa offer current Mexican immigrants living under Donald Trump? How did a culturally diverse (Spanish) background affect her in Texas?
- >> How difficult is it to remain ethical while write pieces/articles using your background and personal experiences?
- >> What is the link between Behar's situation of writing under her fathers name and social anthropology?



# Questions

- » Behar – How strongly does an anthropologists background affect the subjects they study? Behar is a Hispanic/Latina woman who studies Hispanic/Latina women. Is this a trend within modern anthropology as the departure from colonial anthropology continues?
- » Considering Anzaldúa has a Spanish heritage and grew up in The States, what advice could she offer current Mexican immigrants living in America under Donald Trump? How did a culturally diverse background affect her?
- » In terms of Behar, I found the article a little bit unanswered. As it raises interest in her writings but nothing is disclosed. Why, as an anthropologist would you study the roles of your family so long after it was a direct observable act. She documented the past, and as an anthropological account it confuses me how and why she would take such an approach. Is writing about family something that is frowned upon in the academic field and is it even a topic of broader concern? Esperanza is an interesting person who is pushed aside in this short piece, her part in the book makes sense to me as a reader, but the undisclosed business with her parents is somewhat confusing?

# Questions

- >> What is the link between the personal family situation of Behar and the study she did with Esperanza from her book?
- >> Both Anzaldua and Behar use creative techniques in the writing of their books. Is the creative writing techniques, such as poetic phrases and relaxed writing, a common feature in ethnography and the way Anthropologist write?
- >> Where does an anthropologist draw the line between reporting facts and saying something inappropriate and hurtful about someone else
- >> I just found the reading quiet autobiographical however, through understanding that its linked to theatre – I then got to grips with it. I struggled to read the piece due to it not being a "typical" form of ethnography however saw the link to ethnography it had. However, just wanted to clarify if this would also be classified as ethnographic work ?

# Questions

- » Learning about low risks in class, if I were to have a project about something close to me and it will likely cause friction, like Behar and her father, would that be considered a high risk as it complicates your life?
- » Behar's mother confronts her for not asking permission to use her parents as subjects in her ethnographic work. In cases where close family members are used as ethnographic subjects is consent required?
- » Does Anzaldua believe she has the right to write whatever she wants about her parents without their consent or knowledge on what will be published because they are related and therefore the concept of "others" does not apply to them? Does that speak of her as an anthropologist, or is this rather something she would have said to a psychologist as an "other"? In the sense that she does not seem to be objective or sensitive towards them, but is rather writing about HER life and HER subjective experiences of her parents
- » How difficult is it to remain ethical while writing a piece/article when using personal experiences/ backgrounds? This is regarding your family, community, culture?
- » Why did Behar choose to use her parents as the "other" in her writing

# Questions from Abu-Lughod

- >> Abu-Lughod writes about a tale of two pregnancies while she mainly focuses on her own experience within the Egyptian compared to American pregnancy cultures. Is she Egyptian or an American?
- >> In Gluckman's article, how did he get the Zulu people to trust him and open up to him?
- >> For Abu-Lughod: How did one remain open to two very different ways of fertility, pregnancy and birth, that being the traditional ways of the women versus western medicine and procedures.
- >> With reference to the Abu-Lughod reading I would like to know how long she emerged herself in the Awlad 'Ali Beduin culture and also how long it took the women to no longer see her as an outsider but rather as a friend. I would also be interested to know how she approached the women to eventually befriend them.
- >> Even though technology has improved drastically in the times that Zaynab fell pregnant compared to when the Anthropologist did. Why does it seem that the Egyptians have better treatments for the blocking of infertility?

# Questions from Abu-Lughod

- >> Did her subject have an influence on her own birth or did she just observe the process?
- >> Abu-Lughod uses a much more story telling like format for her ethnography, and I wonder if she feels this paints a more accurate/relatable cultural picture than the thick ethnography/"objective" type that is used by Gluckman (as he describes details of events very directly)?
- >> Was her anxiety/interest in the women's superstition about "blockage" based on her personal feelings and fears about being pregnant one day, or was it just from a scientific/anthropologist view of seeing it as rituals and beliefs of another culture?
- >> In terms of content what connects these two authors works?
- >> How was Abu-Lughod able to transition from her lifestyle in the US to the place she stayed in Egypt?

# Questions from Abu-Lughod

- » Watter ander kleurgroepe word na verwys? Is dit slegs wit en swart kleurgroepe?
- » Considering Abu-Lughod writes about wishing she had the support system of the Egyptian women when having given birth, why was she reluctant to first try their natural and superstitious remedies to infertility, before trying IVF? If all of these women have had so many children, and have so much knowledge to share with her, why does she not trust their advice and try it out, before relying on technology, doctors and petri-dish fertilization?
- » I have more of a generalized question and an observation. Reading their experiences makes me wonder if subjectivity and being too attached to the community can have an impact on the ethnographers' other research or even home life, and how can they de-attach themselves? For example with Abu-Lughod during her struggle to get pregnant she tried the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin women's fertility treatments. Then most of her focus when doing research and work in Egypt revolved around pregnancy and fertility.

# Questions from Abu-Lughod

- >> Abu-Lughod writes about feminist ethnography, but I do not understand fully what she means by it. Does it simply refer to a study of women and "female-like-things" or does it refer to the "fight for womens rights" type of feminism? I am confused because I feel like the whole point of feminism is to show that women are capable of more than just bearing children and being wives, but in the end the reading suggests that having a child is all Abu-Lughod seemed to care about.
- >> looking at the Abu-Lughod reading I was wondering does being subjective and being too emotionally invested in ones own personal life heavily impact the research ? And if so how can it be avoided? Im asking this because in the reading it said that when she was doing research in Egypt she was using the Awlad women's fertility methods and experimenting with various other methods.