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### **Between Poetry and Anthropology: Searching for Languages of Home**

As a teenage girl growing up in New York, I wrote many poems. I wrote while staring at the moon from the bedroom in Queens that I shared with my younger brother. I had a pretty good view of the moon—our apartment was on the ninth floor of a brick building whose elevator only stopped on odd-numbered floors. We were immigrants from Cuba and my father told us we ought to feel lucky to live on an odd-numbered floor. If you were a tenant living on an even-numbered floor, you had to get off a floor above or a floor below and take the creepy, hidden stairs either up or down to your apartment.

But I tried not to think too much about the everyday circumstances of our lives. My poems tended to be abstract ruminations on the passage of time and the inevitable decay of things. I spent several weeks writing a poem about the cheap carnations that wilted too soon in the vase on our glass and chrome dining room table. At the time I also loved drama and fiction, and was very drawn to philosophy, especially the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno’s notion of the tragic sense of life. I had an absolutely huge admiration for Simone de Beauvoir, who it seemed to me could do everything—be a philosopher as well as a writer, and a smart, beautiful, and well-traveled woman. I didn’t know in those years that this brilliant person I put on a pedestal suffered from truly wretched spells of depression, occasioned by an incessant lack of self-confidence that was aggravated in her adult life by her beloved Jean-Paul Sartre’s various infidelities.

At home I didn’t receive much encouragement for my poetic and intellectual daydreams. My mother and father worried that I was too studious, that I spent too much

time alone with my books. They were both fun-loving people and on weekends they liked to splash a lot of cologne and perfume on themselves and go out to dinner with their Cuban friends and catch a movie or go dance salsa. Both had gotten as far as high school in Cuba and they thought that was more than sufficient education for me, especially given the fact that I was a girl. My father had dreamed of becoming an architect, but his father forced him to work with him peddling blankets in Havana, so he went to night school and studied the only thing he could, which was accounting. The accounting degree served him well, because he was able to find a job in New York City in a belt and handbag company, but he despised the work and always came home in a bitter mood. I know that he held a lifelong grudge against his father for having broken the wings of his ambition. But when I announced that I'd been accepted at various universities and intended to leave home to further my education, my father became furious and refused to let me go. He felt that I was betraying him and my mother by wanting to leave home. Even though it was the 1970s and the heyday of the feminist movement, he still thought like a man who'd come of age in Cuba in the 1950s and he declared that it wasn't proper for a girl to live anywhere but in her parents' house until it was time for her to be married. Somehow, after shedding many tears at the glass and chrome dinner table, I got my way. I might have surrendered my will to my father had it not been for my high school Spanish teacher, Mercedes Rodríguez, who was also from Cuba, and vigorously defended my desire to advance my education. I think she was living, vicariously through me, what she wished for her daughter, because her daughter, who was my age, had chosen to stay home and not study any further.

So I went off to college hoping to become a poet, or a philosopher-writer of some sort. But I continued to worry about having abandoned my family in New York, though I'd only gone as far as Connecticut. I missed home, missed it more than I dared admit, and was distressed about the economic burden that my education was placing on my parents, even with the scholarship I'd received. Before my first year of college was up, I'd arranged to graduate a year early through a combination of Advanced Placement tests and summer courses and independent study. Being in a rush to get through school, the poems and stories I wrote were produced all too hurriedly. I was impatient, I wanted, as I say about myself in one of my recent poems, to rush my poems out into the street like peddlers who are anxious to be rid of their wares. "How quickly I want the poems to be written! How quickly I want to close the door in their faces! I write with a gun at my temple, I write like a prisoner." Not surprisingly, the teachers I came into contact with in college failed to offer praise, or even just a dab of encouragement for my hasty poems and stories, and I took that to mean I didn't have talent, didn't have the gift for writing.

There was one teacher, in particular, a philosopher by training who'd imbibed wisdom directly from one of the greatest minds of the twentieth century. And she also wrote poetry. Initially, she advocated for me, but I disappointed her when I did poorly on an important test graded by outside examiners. I hadn't studied for the test because I was too busy directing a production of García Lorca's play, *The House of Bernarda Alba*. I had expected to gain her admiration for putting Art above humdrum academic work. Instead, my favorite professor shunned me, just at the moment when I most needed her support. How I longed for even the most feeble words of recognition from her, a few whispered words of faith in my promise. But those words never came. And that was how

I ended up seeking refuge in anthropology—the discipline which attracts all those who are either homesick or homeless, which these days often amounts to much the same thing.

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When I began to write poetry again, I was an adult woman with a career, a child, a car, a mortgage, a frequent flyer account. The second floor of my house sagged from the weight of all the books I'd read and the numerous ones I'd meant to read over the years. I'd published my own books, I'd won fellowships. My name appeared in footnotes in other people's writing. Surely I was over the sadness of having left poetry behind for anthropology. But the sadness was still there, and it emerged unexpectedly in a poem I consider to be a kind of underside to my curriculum vitae. I called it "Obedient Student":

*I was such an obedient student that when my teachers told me I  
wouldn't make a good poet, I stopped writing. I adored words more  
than anything else in the world and preferred to cut out my tongue  
than to insult the Muses with my sickly and impoverished language.  
That is why these poems are so timid: like the invalid who rises from  
her bed after a long convalescence and walks embracing the walls.*

I did try hard to conform to the norms of academic writing in anthropology and my dedication brought results. I got all the rewards that most people seek in an academic career. I was, after all, an obedient student. But the dreams of our youth never leave us. As the years passed, my writing in anthropology became haunted by my longing for poetry. Finally, I came back to poetry, to that intimate voice that had gone into exile, but the poems I wrote *were* timid. They revealed the uncertainty, the humility, the shame I'd come to feel about my abilities as a poet. Still, I wrote poetry anyway, because I needed

poetry; it was the only way I could speak while I was restoring my ties with Cuba as a returning child-immigrant and as an anthropologist who couldn't think about her lost homeland as a fieldsite. Overcome with emotions that were so powerful they produced panic attacks, I discovered a voice etched with longing and regret in poems I wrote in English and translated into Spanish and published in Cuba. Many of these poems found a home in the handmade books of Ediciones Vigía, an artisanal publishing house in the city of Matanzas where my family has roots.

I consider myself fortunate to have been able to acquire another life, a parallel life in Cuba. I've been reborn there as a poet. I can be a poet in Cuba because I left too young to be wounded by teachers who did not love me.

If this statement sounds rather too pained, I can't help wondering just how much pain lies buried unspeakably within the profession that takes as its subject matter the search for languages of home. Naturally, I don't want to over-generalize from my experience, but as I reflect on the fraught relationship between poetry and anthropology in my own life, I've come to see that I am not the only anthropologist who has had frustrated, or at least hampered, poetry ambitions.

A special issue on "Poetry and Anthropology," published in the journal *Dialectical Anthropology* in 1986 and edited by Stanley Diamond, anthropologist and poet, was framed by two telling epigraphs, both written in 1926. The first, by Franz Boas, the German-Jewish father of American anthropology, states: "I'd rather have written a good poem than all the books I'd ever written – to say nothing of a movement in a symphony." The second, by the American-Jewish poet and cultural linguist Edward Sapir, is part of a letter addressed to his friend, Ruth Benedict, a cultural anthropologist

whose lyrical books, *Patterns of Culture* and *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, are classical texts in anthropology. Sapir writes to Benedict, “It is no secret between us that I look upon your poems as infinitely more important than anything, no matter how brilliant, you are fated to contribute to anthropology.”

The volume includes the poems of Ruth Benedict, the lone woman represented, as well as poems by various male anthropologists. Much as I hate to say it, the poems don't shine; they range from acceptable to dismal. For example, Benedict's three stanza poem about her grandmother, entitled “Of Graves,” with its all-too-basic rhymes, describes her elder's carefree relationship to death in this way: “The rabbit nibbled at the grass/Will someday cover me.” The closing stanza reads: “And days I shiver swift and strange/This still is what I see:/Sunlight and rabbit in the grass/And peace possesses me.” After reading this poem and others equally cloying, I, for one, have to disagree with Edward Sapir. I think we have to be very glad that Ruth Benedict wrote her anthropology books. Their importance, and certainly their influence, have been far greater than her poems, which have mercifully fallen into oblivion.

Of course, I feel terrible saying this, because I'm denying to Ruth Benedict, now in *her* grave, the words of praise and recognition for her poetry that I so wanted for my own poetry when I was a student, words that, even now, as I hesitantly return to poetry, I hunger for. But the truth is that Ruth Benedict's poems are a less significant achievement, not because she lacked talent, but because her poems, largely written in the 1920s and early 1930s, were simply not given the same chance to grow and flourish as her anthropological writings. The more she focused her energies on anthropology, the more her poetry writing became a secondary and secret pursuit. At her death in 1948, Benedict

left many unpublished poems, and those which she published, in prestigious journals like *Poetry* and *The Nation*, didn't carry her real name. They were published under the pseudonyms of Ruth Stanhope and Anne Singleton, in an effort to keep them hidden from the eyes of her academic colleagues, and especially from the eyes of her revered mentor, Papa Franz, who she feared would scoff at her flings with the Muse. But as it turns out, while Papa Franz was busy building anthropology into an intellectual edifice that could speak to the ruins of the past and the racisms of the present, he himself secretly wished he could say what it all meant in a good poem, or, alas, being soulfully German, in the movement of a symphony, rather than in so many hundreds of tedious anthropology papers.

What more is there to say, if even Boas, the Big Daddy of modern American anthropology, longed to be able to write *the* poem that could metonymically stand in for all the bottles of ink he spilled to craft persuasive academic prose that might legitimize an always questionable discipline? It's no accident that I, and other ethnographers like me who are drawn to poetry and the literary and visual arts more generally, continue to struggle with the same conundrum. We didn't invent the fraught relationship between poetry and anthropology. We inherited it as part of the family romance of our discipline.

Poetry—not just the literal writing of poems, but the larger desire to speak from a deeper part of the self, which is the goal of all artistic expression—is the thing that we, that is, those of us who are still living out the family romance, thirst for but feel we can't, or rather shouldn't, admit we desire. To long for poetry is to cast doubt on our commitment to maintaining the sobriety and respectability of anthropology within the bureaucracy of the university system. To long for poetry is to want to throw caution to

the winds. To long for poetry is irresponsible. To long for poetry is to be immature, self-centered. To long for poetry is to risk losing it all—losing the academic departments that teach us how to travel to other places and not be ugly Americans, or lately, that teach us how to go home and see something strange there; it is to risk losing the grants that actually pay for us to go to those places and learn about others and ourselves by becoming temporary nomads; it is to risk losing the jobs that allow us eventually to settle down surrounded by native rugs, clay pots, inlaid wood tables, and bark paintings that we are certain are of much better quality than the second-rate stuff sold to the tourists; it is to risk losing the conferences that try to awaken us from our poetry daydreaming and remind us of all the real intellectual work remaining to be done. To long for poetry, under these circumstances, with all these adult responsibilities and obligations and commitments weighing on us, is to turn our backs on the long-suffering discipline that has stood by us through thick and thin descriptions and given a higher purpose to our wanderings. Dare I say it? To long for poetry is to want to commit adultery.

Now, if we consider representations in Western literature and film, adultery isn't necessarily a bad thing. It's often seen as a necessary evil to bring a burst of oxygen to a suffocating marriage, or to break away toward a necessary freedom from a marriage that has been outgrown, or never been grown into. Yet there isn't a Western representation of adultery that lets an adulterer off the hook without paying some penance. As my comadre Esperanza in Mexico always says, "Todo se paga en esta vida." You pay for everything in this life. Take for example Jane Campion's movie, "The Piano." Her willfully silent protagonist, Ada, communicates her poetic longings through her elusive piano playing. The piano has come with her from Scotland across the deep sea, and it symbolizes the

vestige of home she has carried to colonial New Zealand. Her father has sold her—as girls around the world are sold into prostitution today--into a miserable arranged marriage. But Ada finds understanding and passion in the arms of a lover, Baines, a European gone native, complete with facial tatoos. However, in the process of creating a new life with Baines, she calls forth the jealous rage of her husband, who chops off the index finger of her right hand in a scene whose violence is excruciating to watch. After their escape, Baines fashions a metal finger for Ada, and he patiently supports her efforts to speak normally again. But Ada's body is forever marked by the price of her liberation, and her piano playing ceases to be haunting and becomes drab and ordinary.

The first time I saw this movie it made me cry so bad the tears poured out of me in buckets. I've since seen it many times and taught it many times, and it still makes me cry. I'll be watching the movie, analyzing it carefully and critically taking apart the stereotyped representations of the Maori, so I'll be ready to talk to my anthropology students about it the next day, and then it happens, the scene I know is coming... Now, now... Oh, God, it is so terrible.... The scene is too perfect: the relentlessness of the piano music, the rage of the husband, his picking up the ax, the way he rushes to the house and shoves the delicate, birdlike, mute Ada, the way he drags her out to the chopping block and lays her pretty hand down flat and the way he yells at her to declare who she loves and the way he lets the ax fall and the blood starts to flow and the way Ada crumples to the ground in the Victorian full skirt, the way she crumples, as if the air, the breath of life had gone out of her. I can't help myself: I cry, I cry as if my own finger had been chopped off, I believe that it is I who am Ada. I too will be punished if I dare surrender to such an immense passion...

Now, obviously, the consequences are not going to be so dire for those of us who stray from anthropology to have a love affair with poetry. At least I hope not! And there are many ways to carry on an affair. I think Ruth Benedict provided a model that many of us, and I include myself, have followed. The poetic legacy she left us, I believe, is not in the words she wrote in verse and called poems and published under an alias, but in the poetry that she spun through her anthropology, the poetic sensibility that she brought to her scholarship and made inseparable from her scholarship. There is a certain pathos about this, to be sure. She didn't let the affair get out of hand. She kept it under wraps. She brought Poetry home and dressed it as something else, so she could stay loyal to Anthropology. This was good for anthropology, very good for anthropology. But what was good for anthropology was not so good for Ruth Benedict's ambitions as a poet.

We could sit around allowing ourselves to become depressed about Benedict's unrealized potential, but I think there's a positive lesson to take from this history. The lesson is simple and obvious: poetry is bigger than the poem. Poetry is much bigger than the poem. There is poetry to be found in every aspect of our lives. There is poetry to be found in all human endeavors to understand the world. The thing is to know how to see the poetry, how to hear the poetry, how to feel the poetry. More often, the thing is just to remember that it's there. In springtime in Michigan, which is always late and always too brief, I'm grateful for that sign a neighbor I don't know always put up on Seventh Street, which is one of the main arteries through the town. "Slow down and smell the flowers," it says, and I do. I open my windows and bring my driving to a crawl and let the lilacs inside and dare the drivers behind me to honk—which they don't because they're way too polite in Michigan.

So I write my poems while doing my anthropology, just as Benedict did, and fortunately I can do so openly. We now have a Society for Humanistic Anthropology that encourages the writing of poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction by anthropologists. The Society has a magazine that publishes works in these genres and awards yearly prizes for the best works. All this is very positive, and no doubt in the future we'll have a larger group of anthropologists who are equally strong poets and writers. But I know that the more important work I'm doing right now is the effort I'm making to craft a poetic anthropology. After all, we have a lot of poetic poets out there, but tell me, how many poetic anthropologists do you know? Anthropology needs its poetic anthropologists. And the funny thing is that most anthropologists don't know that. Or don't want to know that.

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What does it mean to be a poetic anthropologist? I can tell you what it has meant for me. It has meant allowing myself to experience the emotionally wrenching ways in which we attain knowledge of others and ourselves. In my ethnographic writing, I've made the case that the most charged intellectual insights occur precisely when one's ethnographic work and one's life crash into each other in a head-on collision, even though every effort has been made to keep them running smoothly in their own lanes.

One of the first such collisions I experienced was when I found myself doing research on attitudes toward death in rural Spain with people I'd known for years and come to love, while at the very same moment my dearly beloved grandfather was dying of cancer in Miami Beach. The conflict between these two loves—the love for a soft-spoken grandfather whose hand I remembered holding in Cuba and despaired of losing forever, and the love for the strangers who'd let me become part of their lives—proved

excruciating. I wanted to be in two places at once and I couldn't be. I chose to be in Spain because my family thought it best for things to go on as normally as possible, so my grandfather wouldn't fear his death. But then, when my grandfather died before I could return, I hated myself. It was the loving kindness of strangers in Spain which gave me the hope of attaining some self-forgiveness. Eventually I was able to honor them and my grandfather in a piece of writing that brought them both together, though in real life they inhabited worlds that were completely separate. That writing, a long essay called "Death and Memory," was a doubled ethnography. It was an ethnography of the way death was being commodified in a small, fiercely Catholic village in northern Spain and the pain this was causing people, and it was an ethnography of how the anthropologist who was making the observation had become so detached from her own Jewish roots that she didn't know how to mourn the loss of her grandfather.

After Spain, I spent a considerable amount of time in Mexico in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. It was there that I took the principle of head-on collision between ethnography and life in a different direction, by engaging in an extensive dialogue with Esperanza Hernández, a woman who couldn't be more unlike me, a street peddler, a woman of Indian heritage, an aggressive, self-assured single mother who'd survived both child abuse and domestic abuse and found strength in the veneration of the spirit of Pancho Villa. Esperanza's story became the foundation for my book *Translated Woman*, a feminist ethnography, in which I explored the conjuncture between her life and mine. What kind of observer was I? What was I willing to see and not see in her life? Why was she telling me her story? How would her story travel across the border and what would it mean in the U.S. academy? All these questions formed the framework for the account of

our relationship, which produced new knowledge about the struggles and yearnings of a working-class Mexican woman. While very rooted in the particular life of one woman, this ethnography traveled well beyond its origins; it has been read by Latino and Latina students trying to understand the lives of their Latin American mothers, as well as by women in prison interrogating the violence in their lives, as Esperanza interrogated it in hers, so they, too, can move forward through empowered forms of storylistening and storytelling.

Most recently, I've turned to documentary filmmaking to try to make sense of my own unusual heritage as a Cuban Jew and to learn from others of the same background how they think about their identity. In my film, *Adio Kerida/Goodbye Dear Love*, I create a forum for Cuban Jews on and off the island to speak about what their heritage means to them. Although political and economic differences separate these Cuban Jews, and are made evident in the film, a common search for history and memory unites them. The film becomes an imaginary homeland, a space to envision the reconciliation that has yet to happen fully in reality. It is fascinating to me that the character that Jewish Cubans on the island like the best is my father, who openly declares in the film that he has no wish to return to Cuba and doesn't care what Fidel Castro thinks about anything because he lives in USA. Precisely because he's so genuine and so funny in a typically Cuban manner about the way he says what he feels, he appeals to Cubans on the island because they feel he's so much like them. In turn, my father, in watching the film, has been impressed by the struggles of the Cuban Jews on the island to maintain their faith and traditions in the midst of considerable hardship and isolation. Ethnographically speaking,

the film allows both sides to recognize each other's humanity, which is always the first step toward the making of community.

These, in brief, are some of the ways I've tried to enact and embody poetry within anthropology during the last twenty years. If I had to say what is the thread that ties together these disparate ethnographic pursuits, it's the search, the unceasing search for connection across borders of nationality, ethnicity, class, religion, and ideology. And the search, the unceasing search, for languages of description and analysis that have not grown wooden, languages where the sap still flows. There are words I won't use in my writing, even though the concepts they were meant to express are still of great value. Words, for example, like hegemony and habitus, have been sucked dry by thoughtless overuse. But the bigger issue is that I often feel ill at ease in the presence of academic code languages, otherwise known as jargon. Believe me, I know the jargon, I could use it if I wanted to, but I choose not to, try not to.

For me, this is a moral and political decision. It comes from being a minority scholar, a Latina scholar, from coming to the academy as an outsider, without a sense of entitlement. Not that I had the words to articulate this position when I was a graduate student. I think my real education took place after I was done with my Ph.D. in anthropology. It was at this point, as I began teaching, that I connected what I'd learned in the academy with the world of Latina letters and philosophy, which initially developed beyond the academy because it was viewed as so radical. Gloria Anzaldúa, the Chicana theorist, poet, writer, and philosopher, was a key leader in the Latina movement for self-recognition. I know that she had a major impact on my rethinking. How I wish I didn't have to speak of her in the past tense. Gloria passed away recently, too young, and too

soon. Gloria more than anyone understood the vitality and creativity of mixtures, of conjunctures, of crossroads. Her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, brought into being a genre that blended poetry and prose, theory and family stories, manifesto and analysis, myth and history, English and Spanish that was left deliberately untranslated because she felt it was time for non-Spanish speakers to meet us Latinas and Latinos at least halfway. Gloria always worked on the edge of the academy; she was constantly on the verge of finishing her Ph.D. at U.C.-Santa Cruz. But she struggled with language. She didn't want to use fancy language that would create a new borderland between herself and the Latino community. She advocated for other Latinas to find methods of analysis and research that would not alienate them from their histories and families. I was one of the Latinas who took up her call. Thanks to her example, as well as her gentle encouragement, I found the courage to write poetically, as I'd wanted to in college, but hadn't been able to. She gave me back not only poetry, but philosophy. She gave me back the identity I wanted to claim and wasn't sure I could, telling me there was no contradiction in being Latina and Jewish. She was the loving teacher I'd been looking for, and I only wish I'd thanked her properly while she was alive.

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No doubt, you'll want to ask me, as students often have, whether I get a lot of flack for doing what I do, writing the way I write. Well, gratefully, I have my fans, and somehow I've managed to find a niche in anthropology and in the academy. It's amazing the range of things I get asked to speak to as a broken-hearted anthropologist. Lately, I've been writing a lot of forewords to other people's books—about autobiographical writing across the disciplines, about women on the verge of home, about wounded ethnographers.

I think some seachanges are taking place. It's been shocking to me lately to have two male colleagues of mine at Michigan, who are known respectively for their rigorous work in demographic and linguistic anthropology, pass along manuscripts for me to read that are intensely personal and poetic accounts of the fieldwork stories they never told.

All this is immensely reassuring and does give me some confidence that what I'm doing isn't totally idiosyncratic, but I'd be lying if I didn't tell you that I also get plenty of flack. Serious flack. Flack that really hurts. Because flack hurts more when you've put yourself on the line. Let me share one story that I'm not even sure how to tell. After reading the special issue of *Dialectical Anthropology* on "Poetry and Anthropology" from two decades ago, I thought I'd look to see what they've published lately and, to my surprise, I came across a critical article that included a harsh reading of one of the essays in my book *The Vulnerable Observer*. The article was published in 2000 and no one had ever told me about it. What stunned me, and shouldn't have, was the castigating voice of our profession's gatekeepers, who aren't necessarily the old fogeys, but the young untenured professors made uncomfortable by the artistic flirtations of some of their elders. The writer expressed her wariness about work that is autobiographic and poetic and written in pretty language, because she feels it takes us away from our true mission—to raise up and to make known the voice of the Other. The voice of the People. I could see where she was coming from, because I've heard a million versions of this debate—that auto-ethnography is all about navel-gazing and fails to lift up the People. For me, this rhetoric always smacks of paternal notions of saving the Other because the Other cannot save himself or herself, and personally, very personally, I think it's an insult to the intelligence and independence and creativity of the people who are kind enough to

let us into their lives. Anthropologists, though they detached themselves long ago from the well-meaning salvation enterprises of colonial missionaries, still have kept a strong righteous streak. Criticism coming from that angle I could handle. From my perspective anyway, I was still in the ring.

But the punch I wasn't prepared for was when she compared my efforts to write personally with those of Anne Frank and concluded that my texts didn't have the same urgency, and that my life wasn't as interesting as Frank's life. Of course, I had to agree with her on both fronts, but if every text we write has to measure up to Anne Frank's diary of a death foretold, I don't think most of us are going to be in the running for very long. This comparison, I have to say, struck me as absurd, as cruel to history. I tried to get angry, but I felt overwhelmed by sadness. I wanted to reply, but all that came was silence, a deathly silence. The writer, it was clear, meant to be earnest. She seems to be someone at the start of her career. It is well-known that young scholars often try to make their mark by stabbing their predecessors in the heart and drawing blood. And I'll tell you, she succeeded. She succeeded.

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You'll want to know, because people always ask, is it necessary to have tenure to write the way you do? Some flack is to be expected, after all, but basically, what you're thinking is, she gets away with it. But to do what I do without tenure? Surely it isn't possible. Could a lowly student embark on a similar path?

The answer, as you might expect, is no, you don't have to have tenure, and yes, you can do what I do, and you will do it, if you need to. You will reach a point, as I did, where there is no choice but to work from your poetic self. For me to work in any other

way would be like pulling teeth. I can't do it. A day may come when I will be formally dismissed from the profession—excommunicated, you might say, or perhaps *desterrada*, deterritorialized, cast into exile. But until then, I will do what I do in the name of anthropology, and create the conditions for others who want and need to do the same.

After many, many years spent in the field, as we like to say in anthropology, I now spend much more of my time in the classroom. Those of us who come to teaching with any degree except for an education degree get absolutely no training in pedagogy, but we are magically expected to know what to do in the classroom. I've had to confront a good deal of ambivalence about being a teacher, as well as a good deal of fear. I am always afraid that I will break the transparent butterfly wings of my students, who grow younger and more delicate, it seems, with every passing year. The kind of teacher I am: too nice, because I'm absolutely terrified of causing harm. I know all too well, from my own life, that we are susceptible as students to the words of our teachers. So as teachers we need to be careful about our words. Nothing we say can be taken for granted.

I've developed a range of methods that I believe help to validate the role of the imagination in intellectual work. Every year I teach an undergraduate course about Cuba since the 1959 Revolution and examine both Cuban culture on the island and Cuban culture brought to the United States by Cuban immigrants. We read across the disciplines and consider a range of themes including Cuban history, politics, race relations, the role of women, art, music, and Afro-Cuban religions. The course meets requirements at Michigan for courses focusing on race and ethnicity and it also meets a writing requirement. The course is accompanied by a weekly film series and they are required to keep journals about the films. The students write three papers that they're encouraged to

draft and redraft. For their final project they are given the option of writing a research paper or doing a creative project in any format they wish. The students almost always choose to do the creative project. All the creative projects are presented in the final class during a four to five hour performance party complete with fresh tamales made by a local Salvadoran caterer. The last class is always a lively culmination to an intense semester of immersion in all things Cuban. The students love working on their final projects and this love shows in their presentations. Last year I had two women students who were very moved by the stories of the *balseiros*, the rafters who make the plunge into the sea and risk their lives to get to the United States. Their presentation consisted of building a life-size raft, before our eyes, using junked pieces of wood found at Home Depot, on which they painted an image of the Virgen de la Caridad, the patron saint of Cuba. This year I had a gay student from Peru who had fallen behind on schoolwork because of personal troubles and whom I feared wouldn't come to the last class. But he came and delighted us all, arriving cross-dressed in a tight gown and high-heeled platform shoes, impersonating beautifully the great Cuban diva Celia Cruz, who just recently passed away. There were students who performed the work of Cuban poets, there were students who composed music inspired by Cuban rhythms, there were students who conducted interviews on what their peers think of Che Guevara; and there was a cigar-loving student who researched every aspect of cigar production in Cuba and made the rest of the students try their hand at rolling cigars. Students of Cuban origin in the class who'd never talked to their families about their heritage went home and discovered stories they needed to form their own identities.

On the graduate level, I teach a course each year on ethnographic writing. What began as a course for anthropology students interested in learning about creative ways to write their ethnographies has grown into an inter-disciplinary class that also attracts students in education, literature, history, creative writing, ethnic studies, nursing, and psychology, all of whom come to the seminar with concerns about the possibilities and limits of representing lived experience. All of them want to write more poetically and vividly, but they're not sure how far they can go. In the class we read poetry, fiction, everything from urban to feminist ethnographies, personal essays from the *New Yorker*. I give students writing assignments in the first few weeks to get them thinking about voice, place, and what kinds of observers they want to be. And then they do their own writing and we discuss it in workshop format in class. Ultimately, I hope the class gives students the courage to know what they know and speak what they think.

Two graduates of the class have recently defended their dissertations, and they have both done projects that were immensely brave and imaginative. Erica, whose Jewish family is of Polish origin, went to Poland, learned Polish, and studied the way the legacy of the Holocaust is being taken up by contemporary Polish people in Cracow, many of whom learn Hebrew and otherwise immerse themselves in things Jewish to seek reconciliation with their history. Her family thinks she's crazy for doing this, rather than doing something more Jewish herself, like learning Hebrew herself and going to Israel. Her dissertation is written as a series of moving vignettes that move between Jewish and Polish voices. In turn, Gisela, who is from Mexico and suffered sexual abuse as a young girl, chose to seek out a deeper understanding of masculinity by working in Cuba with gay men who sell sex to North American and European tourists. In addition to writing life

stories of the men, placing side by side the contradictory views of the Cuban men and the sex tourists, she used video, often giving the men the camera to film themselves and each other. The result is an ethnographically rich portrait of the ways in which intersecting and conflicting desires come together in our globalized and highly unequal world. What impresses me about the work of both Erica and Gisela is how they released the poetry in their personal lives to move ethnography in new, more powerful directions, where what's at stake in the work is never just an intellectual exercise but knowledge that is essential, knowledge that you couldn't live without.

I am now at that stage in a teacher's life where I can learn as much from my students as they can learn from me. It's that stage where the students take your ideas and run with them a whole extra mile, a mile you're not sure you can run anymore. And maybe, though I wouldn't have expected it back when I was a student in search of a teacher who could love me, maybe that is the ultimate homecoming.