Ethnographic Memories: The politics of fieldwork
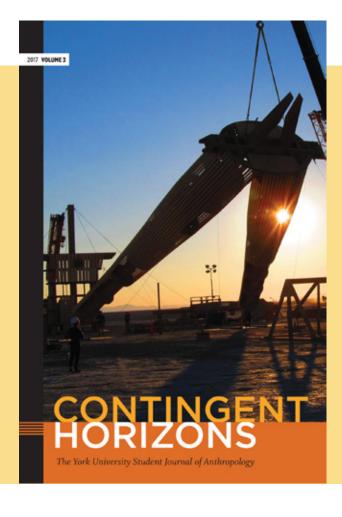
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Ethnographic Memories
The politics of fieldwork

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This article explores the similarities between a memoir and an ethnographic work. A memoir stands as an historical account written from personal knowledge. It is a form of writing that should resonate deeply within the heart of the anthropologist, whose very own specificity is to be, first and foremost, an ethnographer. That is, anthropologists are individuals full of (hi) stories, contingence, and subjectivity, who nevertheless struggle to bring "objective" accounts of what had happened under their eyes during fieldwork. I use this short comparative act as a jumping board to examine the politics of knowledge in the history of anthropological inquiry since the Enlightenment. More precisely, this comparison represents an opportunity to look at what is silently invested in the practices of ethnographical writing. In a brief discussion, I highlight the political implications that surround issues of knowledge production, expert voices, and translation amidst the discourse and narrative of anthropologists.

KEY WORDS memoirs, memories, ethnography, politics of knowledge, expertise, fieldwork

The whiteness of her face seemed to be a remnant of a forgotten lore. I was staring at the paperback version of *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997). Its book cover portrayed a young and somewhat nubile geisha, a traditional female entertainer that had become a well-known icon of Japanese culture. For an unknown reason, the book had been misplaced in the Japanese studies section of my former university's library. Going through its pages, I could not help but ponder as to why the book had been confused with scholarly works. Could "real" knowledge be gain from a memoir? After all, the book has been critically praised for its authenticity and portrayal of the Gion district, an area famous for its geisha. The more I contemplated this question, the more I was struck by the numerous ironies that this book contains. *Memoirs of a Geisha*, is actually a fictionalized account of the life of a real geisha, Mineko Iwasaki. Yet, an American man who "embodies the life and voice of a Japanese woman" wrote the book (Allison 2001:395). While the memories of another had been "borrowed," the memoir is nonetheless perceived as an historically accurate depiction of the world of geisha (see Allison 2001: 382). It had perhaps been misplaced for this very own reason. The almost ethnographic writing of the author, Arthur Golden, seems to have granted *Memoirs of a Geisha* "higher truth value and therefore authority," where "fantasy collapses into 'knowledge'" (Allison 2001:385).

After this small library mischief, the boundaries that define and separate a memoir from an ethnographic work appeared much more porous to my person. I began to wonder at what scope these two genres of literature overlap and weave together, simultaneously blurring the edge among facts, fictions, and storytelling. To what extent do memoirs concur with anthropological writing and what insights can be gained in doing such comparison? In this article, I therefore explore the similarities between a memoir and an ethnographic work. More precisely, I use this short comparative act as a jumping board to examine the politics of knowledge in the history of anthropological inquiry since the Enlightenment period. I later focus on three ethnographic cases that have successfully highlighted the silently invested political practices of ethnographic writing. In an ensuing discussion, I explore more thoroughly the political implications that surround issues of knowledge production, expert voices, and translation amidst the discourse of anthropologists.

In a nutshell, the politics of knowledge refers to the inseparability of knowledge and political activities (Rubio and Baert 2012). However, by the 'politics of knowledge,' I do not wish to emphasize how governmental structures, such as the judiciary institutions or the heads of the state, influence issues of knowledge-making and vice-versa. As Marilyn Strathern argues, "the notions of 'the political' and 'political personhood' are cultural obsessions of our own, which we should be wary, in their specificities, of projecting on to others." (c.f. Rapport and Overing 2007:167). From this viewpoint, politics cannot be merely understood through discrete and fixed entities (Rubio and Baert 2012:8). Rather than focusing on "politics" as a set of pre-given institutions and unified structures, my account embraces a much more porous conception of the word political. In such, I focus on the manifold processes of negotiation, translation, as well as the distribution of power affecting the relationship of humans in the production of an ethnographic paradigm. This approach enables me to see all knowledge projects as political, highlighting the fact that "researchers are never free from the values and interests of particular social locations." (Kirksey 2009:157). Rubio and Baert (2012:2) have argued that knowledge is constitutive of the world in which we live in and therefore invariably political. It is the world of anthropologist and their specific politics upon knowledge that constitutes the subject of my interest.

On Porous Grounds

Thinking about memoirs and ethnographies, I now turn my gaze away from the Orient, toward the emerald green forests of Brazil, where a famous anthropologist first conducted his fieldwork. In his book *Tristes Tropiques,* I have always wondered why French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss started like this: "I hate travelling and explorers" (1973:17). *Tristes Tropiques* is a unique piece among Lévi-Strauss' scholarship; it mixes travel memories, ethnographic works, and philosophical ponderings. First and foremost, it stands as an incredible account of his life and work as an ethnologist, but also as a human being. Lévi-Strauss' voice, which I often find so effaced, distant, and apolitical, is amidst the yellowish pages of my copy of *Tristes Tropiques* limpid and clearly present. One can almost hear his distinctive pitch, typical of French intellectuals.

On one page the reader stumbles upon the author's recollection of his youth in Brazil, on the next we find a detailed study of Nambikwara's Amerindian populations. *Tristes Tropiques* is a strange book, an odd piece of ethnography, which oscillates between personal

accounts and ethnographic details, where both of those pieces are, before and after all, memories. It is along these blurred edges or uncertain boundaries that we can find one of his most poignant works. Needless to say this book has always intrigued me, perhaps because I find it so hard to categorize amidst a given body of theoretical frameworks, such as French structuralism, a label that has often stuck with his later works. Tristes Tropiques is neither an ethnography per se, or a travel story lost in the *faux-semblant* that is exoticism, the last bastion of occidental men.[1] By its form, poetics, and texture it is closer to the memoir, because that is what constitutes most of the book: a (re)collection of memories, the memoir of an ethnographer who hated travelling and explorers.

In reading *Tristes Tropiques* one cannot help but think that ethnographic works and memoirs are perhaps not so distant forms of writing. While both genres are based on the work of retrospection and remembrance, some memories matter more than others. Some memories are deemed important enough to lay on paper, while others are discarded at the convenience of the writer, as are the people who are part of them. In the next parts, I explore in more details the relationship between memoirs and ethnographic works.

Memoirs and Ethnographies

A memoir stands as an *historical* account written from *personal* knowledge (see Conrad 1986; Gamble 1994). It is a form of writing that should resonate deeply within the heart of the anthropologist, whose very own specificity is primarily as an ethnographer. That is, an anthropologist is an individual full of (hi)stories, contingence, and subjectivity, who nevertheless struggles to bring an 'objective' account of what had happened under his or her eyes. More precisely, I use this comparison as an opportunity to look at what is *silently* invested in the practices of ethnographic writing. I wish to address more thoroughly the political role and consequences of ethnographic discourses and narratives. I approach the notion of the political, because I think that every memoir has an embedded political framework. Obviously, political memoirs could come to mind, but if one also embraces a more informal definition of the word "politics"—as highlighted before—then it is not hard to consider memoirs through a political lens. The memories that matter or not in a memoir; the ones that are deemed relevant are always negotiated. Therefore, one should think of memoirs as specific visions proposed to the readers. They are also the works of individuals who are important *enough* to be published and to subsequently be heard by an audience. They are the memories of individuals who have the authority to tell their story and, more importantly, to legitimize it. As Lisa Yoneyama (1995:502) argues: "To possess and demonstrate one's own memories is therefore inextricably tied to power and autonomy." The process that underlies ethnographic writing is perhaps not so different.

Often preconceived notions of memoirs link them with works that are thought to be factual, true, and bias-free; for example, Diebel (2002) shows how political memoirs are even regarded as valuable resources in the teaching of diplomatic history, foreign policy, and international relations. Yet, a memoir remains a personal account, a story that is told by a single individual. In a sense, it can be considered as a subjective version of what someone consider objective. One could even go farther as to compare it to a form of storytelling. After all, that is what good memoirs primarily do—they catch the reader up in their *emotional* narratives (and not merely in the "facts" that constitute them) until the very last

page of the book. As opposed to biographies, which often target the whole panorama of a human life, memoirs generally discuss the turning points in the lifetime of an individual, the touchstone matters of what constitutes an "interesting" life (see Conrad 1986:149). Sometimes, whole sequences and events are skipped, considered irrelevant, while other memories are embellished and turned into an enjoyable, moving, and potentially inspiring story. As Stoller has mentioned, a memoir does "make readers feel like they are getting a 'real' story presented in accessible prose" (2007:182).

Yet, when one browses the counters of a bookstore where can memoirs be found? In the literature and fiction department? Try again…. In the romance category? Keep looking…. Perhaps in the mystery and thriller section? Another dead-end. Now, try your luck in the non-fiction corner and chances are that you will find something. While memoirs in their form, content, and texture obviously blur the edge between facts and stories, they are rarely sold under the label of fiction. One does not need to search long to see the basic dichotomy that emerges in the form of the memoir: to the bare core, I would argue that they straddle objectivity and subjectivity.

Anthropology since its disciplinary inception emerged from a similar dichotomous cradle, causing many to understand the nature of anthropological work in specific ways. The paradox of objectivity and subjectivity that is found within the form of the memoir can easily be transposed to the practices of ethnographic writing, providing a chance to explore the consequences of such a schism. Indeed, feelings, beliefs, political affiliations, and any other remnants of an ethnographer's subjectivity have always been a part of anthropological inquiries—whether explicitly acknowledged or not. Yet, although not far from a memoirist, the ethnographer has never been defined as a writer of fiction. Individual assertions, based on the fieldwork memories that one deemed relevant, have neither been regarded as anecdotes, tales, or different perspectives. They were rather ethnographic facts, in the same ways that a memoir's events are considered historical events.[2] Far from being a storyteller that conveys his or her viewpoint, the ethnographer was not understood to be a writer of fiction, but a writer of science. Like the memoirist, who is the storyteller *and* the object of the story, anthropology was the science (*logos*) where Man (*anthropos*) is both the producer of knowledge and the object of it. However, this position expresses a particular dilemma, similar to the one that is found among many memoirs, where the writer's subjectivity ends up making much of the objective framework that surrounds this genre. Event more recent incarnations of anthropology exhibit a similar double-bind, where the ethnographer is "a creature that can know the world of which it is existentially a part only by taking leave of it" (Ingold 2013:745). Initially to surpass such a problem and to become a respectable science, anthropology had to embrace a specific position, where scholars had to stand high and strong against assumptions, interpretations, and beliefs (see Latour 2003). A way to do so was to mimic the Enlightenment naturalists and their "pure" science (Descola 2001, 2011). Such a dualistic framework (social science against a natural one) culminated with the dichotomization of anthropology itself. As French anthropologist Philippe Descola argues, "a first split took place at the end of the nineteenth century […] to physical anthropology came the establishment of a unity beyond variations, while social anthropology was to expose variations on the background of an unlikely unity" (my translation, 2011:9–10). This rose to a crescendo with the nature-culture nexus, upon which an enormous body of work and knowledge has emerged. In this regard, and to

go back to Lévi-Strauss, it is worth considering Alice Lamy's (2008) insightful critique of the *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, written six years before *Tristes Tropiques*. As she argues:

> The text of Lévi-Strauss fits in rupture and continuity with classical theories [such as Rousseau and Hobbes' "state of nature"]. First of all, the argument of the author is devoid of any political purpose and is a matter of pure anthropological perspective. This perspective leads Lévi-Strauss to make a conceptual shift in his work: one passes from the distinction state of nature/state of society to the distinction state of nature/state of culture. (my translation, Lamy 2008:33–34)

Here, one should not crucify Lévi-Strauss as the father of all dualism in anthropology. Structuralism was never a dogma, but only a method that resorted to binary opposition, useful in some cases, but not in all. Furthermore, the distinction between nature and culture had no "acceptable historical significance" for Lévi-Strauss; it was only a "tool to think of Man as both a biological being and a social individual" (my translation, Lamy 2008:34). The only point that I wish to put forward is that politics was not, for Lévi-Strauss, an issue of major importance in the production of ethnographic work, even if his works have ironically triggered in me an interest in the political implications that surround ethnographic writings. As Alice Lamy argued, "His ambition has always been to approach something like the universal laws of the human mind" (my translation, 2008:30). It is not the shift *per se* toward another dichotomy that is interesting for this article, but rather the dismissal of political purpose in the production of an anthropological literature and writing form. It is sometimes on similar "apolitical" grounds that particular canonical forms of ethnography have been cemented and it is the repercussions of such "objective" frames of mind that I wish to highlight. In the next part, I explore the consequences of those apolitical grounds, by focusing on three case studies.

Glaciers, Beans, and Monkeys

In this section, I target three ethnographic cases that have successfully highlighted the silently invested political practices of ethnographic writing. I begin with the work of anthropologist Julie Cruikshank (2006), who has been interested in the link between local knowledge and colonial encounters, in an effort to address more thoroughly the political role and consequences of anthropological discourses. She first discusses the work of Briggs and Bauman, who argued that the legacy of anthropologist Franz Boas has "trained ethnographic fieldworkers to use the metaphorical incentive of the book as a 'storage-box' to elicit texts, a method that […] gave him [Boas] enormous power to regulate the production, circulation, and reception of those accounts" (Cruikshank 2006:59). As Cruikshank demonstrates, Briggs and Bauman argued that such text collections provided for Boas and cultural anthropology a "direct access to timeless cultural traditions—to 'myth' rather than to history" (2006:59). In the process of gathering and re-contextualizing those texts, Cruikshank (2006) contended that Boas has erased his own particular role, while subsequently diminishing the Natives' place as potential narrators, especially by disregarding the context in which their narratives and stories took place. She

argued: "He subsequently re-rooted them in a thoroughly modernist practice—preservation and protection—while continuing to burnish them as authentic replications of 'the native point of view'" (2006:59). Interested in those modernist practices of preservation, and building on political ecology's insights, Cruikshank subsequently demonstrates that particular notions used in our discourses about nature (such as the construction of "wilderness"[3]) are utterly ethnocentric against indigenous populations such as First Nations, since they thoroughly erase "their prior occupancy, proceeded apace" (2006:255). These formulations and modernist practices thereby "deny varieties of local knowledge their own histories" (Cruikshank 2006:257), especially by freezing them as a mere set of apolitical stories and memories, which are irrelevant to some of our problems like global warming. In those conditions, we can see that the expertise of knowledgeable people, such as First Nations, are often taken out of their "evocative contexts" to be merely "taped, transcribed, codified, and labelled" (Cruikshank 2006:256).

Anthropologist Kregg Hetherington (2013) offers a similar example by studying the introduction of soybean to Paraguay and their unintended consequences. In particular, he focused on the recurring statements of Campesino activists who argued that soybean kills—a discourse that the state quickly dismissed as simply irrational. The interesting point is that Hetherington initially, like the State officials of Paraguay, disregarded the narratives surrounding the so-called killer beans, re-establishing in the process the "priority of frames of reference" in understanding a given problem (2013:71–72). Hetherington first thought that these discourses were, "at best, a figure of speech not meant to be taken literally or, at worst, a mistaken reading of the situation caused by a restricted understanding of what was going on" (2013:71–72). However, he later realized that disregarding the "political importance and analytic potential of the beans" was also a dismissal of the lives of Campesino activists (2013:82). Indeed, doing so was to consider the rural activists' analyses of the problems brought by the introduction of soybean as something irrelevant (2013).

For the third case, I wish to look at *Primate Visions*, written by science and technology studies (STS) scholar Donna Haraway (1990). In her book, the author was interested in the scientific practice of physical anthropology and primatology as a form of "story-telling practice in the sense of historically specific practices of interpretation and testimony" (1990:4). Rather than taking the primatologists' body of knowledge as an apolitical dogma, she takes it up as a set of discourses narrated by expert storytellers. Wishing to challenge the constructions of these stories, she put forward the numerous political stakes (relating to gender, race, colonialism, and scientific objectivity) that are to be found in the production of knowledge surrounding primates' taxonomy (1990:3) She argues that "primatology is about an Order, a taxonomic and therefore political order that works by the negotiation of boundaries achieved through ordering differences" (1990:10). Her work has revealed how science, monkeys, and expertise—among others—were themselves embodied in the politics of the early and mid-20th century. By looking at physical anthropology from the vantage point of discourse and narrative, Haraway was able to see epistemic systems as "stories," which are culturally specific and charged with political implications. Such stories are being told by particular groups of experts who might intentionally (or unintentionally) be silencing the voices of others. This could be a charming metaphor for the anthropologists whose fieldwork often consists of "collecting" stories from informants while trying

to understand specific knowledge forms by looking over the shoulder of the so-called "Other".[4]

Discussion: The Politics of Fieldwork

The numerous examples brought by Cruikshank, Hetherington, and Haraway, demonstrate how ethnographic works that might at first seem factual, neutral, and objective, more than often hide unconscious political and subjective frames that enable particular forms of knowledge, while disregarding others. They define what counts as expertise, who has the right to speak, and who should (silently) listen. In many of those cases, the pursuit of knowledge involves, as Allison (2001:386) argues, a "process in which the subject of inquiry is, almost by definition, reduced to the status of an object. And, in the case of the study of other cultures, this aggression is exacerbated even further." Since the crisis of representation, perhaps best exemplified by Clifford and Marcus' *Writing Culture* (1986), anthropologists have been more in tune with how univocal modern paradigms might be reinstating blatant dualisms that bring new forms of inequality, hierarchy, colonialism, racism, and ethnocentrism. All three previous authors are very attuned to what anthropologists and STS scholar Kim Fortun has called "discursive gaps" (2009). As she argued, "Discursive gaps are gaps in what discourses can say or even recognize. They are what people can't get their heads and tongues around. They operate through disavowal and ignorance" (2009:9). The goal of being attuned to such gaps is something that echoes the aim of Haraway's cyborg politics: a struggle that stands against "perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism" (1991:176)—in other words, a struggle against essentialist features and foundational categories.

What is also striking about the three case stories are the political implications that surround the very practice of ethnographic writing, as well as the place of the ethnographer. In the issues surrounding the creation of ethnographic work, it is important to be attuned to the role that anthropologists play, especially as "experts" who produce "first hand" accounts of given knowledge. Anthropology is indeed a science embedded in a rich history of colonialism, where the savage (sometimes noble) opposed the Victorian Englishman—a science where the expert, the ethnologist, relied not merely on its own memory but also on its anonymous and plural informants, the ghostwriter of their memoir. As philosopher Isabelle Stengers says:

> The anthropologist produces, whether he wants it or not, a set relationship that is more often inherently asymmetrical: he reports to "us" a knowledge about other groups without putting to the foreground the relationship upon which his knowledge comes, or by simply being at the service of a science to produce. (2007:9)

Indeed, as Timothy Mitchell has argued, experts do not merely report social relations and knowledge forms; instead, they also work to format and produce them (2002:118). In that line of thought, anthropologists, who often speak more than one language,[5] need to be conscious of the political implications that their works of translation might imply. As historian

Gyan Prakash explained, translation always implies a certain realignment of power, as well as a renegotiation of the unequal relationship between investigators and their subjects (1999:50). Going back to *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Allison (2001) has highlighted how the role of the outsider (in this case an American male writer) is crucial in shaping the story arch and its mass appeal to an English speaking audience, even though the memoir takes the form of a first person narrative told by the Geisha protagonist.[6]

While anthropologists have been warier of such difficulties, the problems are numerous and to be found on many levels. In that regard, anthropologist Arturo Escobar asks an interesting question: "How does one study and describe situations in which the objects or subjects are thoroughly constituted by the same knowledge practices of which the ethnographer herself is also a product?" (2008:294). Still, I think that political ecologist Paul Robbins has raised one of the most intelligible inquiries surrounding ethnographical issues. This question concerns how scholars, in search for the concepts used in political ecology, such as governmentality or marginalization, often discover them in the process of doing fieldwork (2004:151). Specifically, he argued: "The concepts pre-exist such discovery and so always seem to turn up! One key lesson is certainly that the reification of categories early in the research process may be limiting and unnecessarily constraining. Better political ecology requires care in this regard" (2004:151). While this warning was directed at political ecologists, any ethnographer can benefit from such an insight. Robbins was not looking to disregard the usefulness of our theories of knowledge; rather, he simply wished to emphasize the constraining aspects related to taken-for-granted notions.

Indeed, before going to the field, before writing a single line in its notebook, and even before meeting the people that they wishes to "study", the anthropologist always knows what to look for. Yes, anthropologists might be lost in translation, they might not know where to look for *it*, who to learn *it* from, or when to gaze at *it*, but they always know what they are looking for, as they first and foremost track categories. Perhaps this is due to the predictive power of theory. Because, in many ways, that is what theory does: theory tells the ethnographer to locate *what* matters. In a sense, the horse is being put before the proverbial cart, as such teleology presupposes that we concretely know what matters for people that we have not even met, and who often do not share much of a modicum of economical luxury that a funded ethnographer has. Indeed, fieldworkers need to work "with a strict plan of investigation, which is what the granting agencies insist they manifest *before* they even go into the field" (Taussig 2011:48). Furthermore, by looking for specific problems, such as ecological degradation or political marginalization, the ethnographer is at risk of tracking such notions through Eurocentric values—an ethnocentric lens—and crystalizing those problems in given epistemological and ontological states. As Taussig notes: "Much of anthropology, certainly most that is funded, thus turns out to be telling other people's stories without realizing that's what you are doing, and telling them badly, very badly indeed [...] such stories are seen as mere steps toward the Greater Truth of the Abstraction" (2011:49).

In a related viewpoint, many scholars have successfully demonstrated that the "production of universal, totalizing theory is a major mistake that misses most of reality" (Haraway 1991:181). With this mindset, anthropologists have asked how they are politically situated in writing about the so-called "Other" in their own ethnographic practices. As Stoller highlights, anthropologist have recently experimented with diverse ethnographic forms

that "did not conform to the tried and true realist structure of theoretical introduction, presentation of data, and conclusion" (2007:180). By blurring the lines between memoirs, imagination, and story, anthropologists have been more attuned to the subtle subjectivity of the ethnographer, the "empowered person who controls the construction of the text […]" (Stoller 2007:180). Yet, one should also consider how apolitical and non-located forms of knowledge are embedded, not merely in our writing paradigm, but also in the academic practices of anthropology, unconsciously re-establishing powerful frames of domination. We could say that anthropologists need to be mindful of their own academic modes of production, to their methods of producing (his)tories. For example, what is the concrete use of a $150 hardcover ethnographic inquiry—perhaps unaffordable by the marginalized, vulnerable informants—whose commercial success is made possible by a network of high-grossing universities' libraries, later to be read by a minority of academics? Significantly, this academic minority might not share much of the problems discussed in the books, nor be in a position of power great enough to contribute to potent changes. Furthermore, trendsetting theories, which define the practice, expertise, and future of anthropological work, irremediably emerge from occidental languages, mostly epitomized by the *lingua franca* that is English. The very work of peer-review also erases any trace of individuality. The name of the ethnographer is replaced by the apolitical and phantomatical 'I'. Funding projects bring this to a next level; as Taussig argues: "Invariably the application begins not with 'I wish to study…,' but with 'This project is aimed at…' In one stroke anything subjective is not so much erased as it is disguised and distorted by this language" (2011:48).

In the Heart of Darkness

Kim Fortun has argued that scholars of anthropology are "always confronted with more to understand and more to address than is possible" (2001:350). As a young scholar focusing on the Fukushima nuclear disaster (Polleri 2015, 2016), I especially know that this is the case. Yet, this is not what scares me the most. After all, the numerous problems that surround the issue of nuclear contamination in the aftermath of this disaster cannot be captured in their entirety. Neither should they be, as this denies "the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective" (Haraway 1991:191), one of the best contributions that an ethnographer can make as to what regards a given problem. In the midst of doing fieldwork, what scares me the most is how and why I write. At night, when I try to recall the encounters that have constituted my working day in order to lay them on paper, I cannot help but to get that weird feeling, that "sinking feeling that the reality depicted receded, that the writing is actually pushing reality off the page" (Taussig 2011:16). As Taussig argues: "Perhaps it is an illusion. But then, illusions are real too" (2011:16).

As an anthropologist, I am interested in how diverse forms of knowledge and being interact, and to what extent different actors articulate them. In that line of thought, every scholar should be careful about the investment in an anthropological epistemological practice used to study other epistemological practices and forms; exploring the tensions of epistemologies as a frame of reference itself remains important. In other words, a reflection of anthropological knowledge production in understanding how one writes about people has started to haunt me. In this context, I have begun to ask: for whom do I write? And the answer is an egoistic one: me. As a young scholar, one cannot help but to produce

a very specific form of expertise, reflective of a particular academic framing, and one that revolves around publications, conferences, and thesis writing. After all, this article has focused on the diverse processes of negotiation, translation, and power inequalities affecting the relationship of humans in the production of an ethnographic paradigm. While this is still a broader notion of 'the political' it still represents a cultural obsession of North American anthropologists. For this reason, I do construct knowledge in a very selective manner. One cannot help but to come full circle back to the memoir, which is also the indulgence of one's feelings; a form of writing that is sometimes contended with an egoistic self-absorption, where one chooses the memories and people that matter.

On the other hand, a memoir is never a memoir without a public, and ethnographic writing also implies a set of relations, an ongoing politics between the 'I' and multiple forms of otherness that are imaginatively materialized on paper. As Taussig notes, "there is always a bigger 'you' than yourself, a 'you' of many readers looking over your shoulder" (2011:77). An ethnography is not an ethnography in "good and due form" without its body of experts that categorize it as so.

When I glance at my notebook, I begin to see two things. I see sanitized data, under the form of facts, evidence, and information, where the "imaginative logic of discovery" is quickly "followed by the harsh discipline of proof" (Taussig 2011:xi). Between the lines of my notebook, I see something else, memories that do not seem to "fit", memories that matter—inevitably for some of my informants—but not for the requirements of my particular academic framing.[7] Taussig has argued that the notebook lies "at the outer reaches of language and order" (2011:118). Yet, as an ethnographer interested in Japanese culture, I still write in my notebook from left to right, never from up to down. Writing a memoir is an occupation devoid of any surprises, as the story irremediably revolves around the same protagonist. To some extent, ethnographers should be mindful of this insight. What anthropologists need are alternative forms of narrative that can, as Gosselin (2011:142) argues, avoid any false representations of a given finality. These alternative narratives must effectively suppress politically dominant discourses, without themselves becoming a prevalent paradigm. Upon leaving Fukushima, I wonder if the memories associated with the pain of other people will be erased forever? In the loud rumble of the metallic beast, will I even be able to hear Mistah Kurtz murmuring: "The horror! The horror!"?

Notes

1 *Memoirs of a Geisha* is a book that makes use of exoticism. As Anne Allison argues: "The book is written in such a way that it fosters the impression of taking a trip to an exotic, distant land whose foreignness is 'unmasked' and whose 'veil of secrecy' lifted, allowing readers/travellers to enter into a 'secret world of the geisha'" (2001:382).

2 Of course, such sayings hereby apply to a pre-WWII anthropology. The anthropologist positionality has been extensively questioned in the 80s. As Allison (2001:390) argues, anthropologists have become much more self-reflective at unmasking their "own positionality and rhetorical strategies when studying (and representing) others."

3 For example, William Cronon (1996) argues that wilderness should not merely be thought of as a mutually exclusive ontological realm, but also as a social and cultural construct.

4 Reading over the shoulder of the "Other" echoes the scholarship of Clifford Geertz, and his idea of reading cultural practices as "texts." His work has also been seen as straddling the literary and the non-fictional.

5   Even monolingual anthropologists can be said to speak more than one 'language' if they are attuned, for example, to the vernacular forms of a language, to 'scientific' talk, or to the slangs of subcultures.

6   The real Geisha that inspired those events later sued Goldman for defamation and wrote her own memoirs in order to set the stakes right by telling the "true" story. Too often, in ethnographic accounts, as in memoirs, the memory of others can only achieve true value and authority in the actual hand of anthropologists or American novelists.

7   In that regard, Allison (2001:383) has asked us to reflect on the extent toward which a writer is responsible for the effect of his or her writing. This is made even more important when we consider that specific cultures and societies do get "known and seen through our representations" (383).

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