

# Salvaging Lives in the African Diaspora

*Anthropology,  
Ethnography, and  
Women's Narratives*

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**Salvage** the rescue of any property from destruction or waste (*Webster's New World Dictionary* 1979:423).

*Rose: I am the last girl of a family of seven baby girl, baby sister. My parents were very poor. My father was an alcoholic. He died when I was seven and my mother had to work to raise us, so I grew up among brothers, so I was a very rough little girl. I climbed trees and admired their courage. When I grew up, things slowed down. I started to see what happens to women who live with an alcoholic. I tell myself, I don't want to go through that the pain, the anguish.*

*I met my husband at eighteen. But there was a problem. We were not of the same ethnic group. He was Indian [Maya] and I Garifuna.<sup>1</sup>*

With these words, I am invited into the narrative of a young woman, who is the same age as I and like me has two children: a son and a daughter. We share so much and yet our lives are so different. With these words, I am introduced to a marginal woman (Rose), who lives in a marginal district (Toledo), often referred to as "God's backside" or the "tail end" of a country, that is a marginal place, Belize (formerly British Honduras), of which few people have heard. And even if they have

heard of Belize, most people fail to realize that it is uniquely situated in Central America as the only English-speaking enclave in an expanse of Spanish language and culture—a metaphoric Caribbean island in a very real Spanish environment.

Rose's words also mark the beginning of my journey as an "authentic" anthropologist, trained to study the "Other" by folk who sometimes, conveniently, forget that I am "the Other." Her words mark the beginning of my attempts to understand gender as lived experience. They bear witness to my desire as a scholar to *salvage* (i.e., to recover, record, and reveal) the words and memories that constitute women's "life stories," which according to Susan Chase are "narratives about life experience that . . . [are] of deep and abiding interest to the interviewee."<sup>2</sup> Rose's words bear witness to my obsession, "a beautiful obsession," with narrative, which I view as a transformative experience that reveals more often than not who the speaker has become more so than what they were socialized to be. I see narrative as a bridging of representations—the new/transformative (articulated in the telling) with the old/enculturated (out of which the speaker weaves herself anew). In this respect, narrative construction is a form of particularized social knowledge production and a process of identity forma-

tion undertaken by the actor as a means of making sense out of her social world. In effect, narrative serves as a way for us to see how personhood, culture, history, and memory are mediated through the telling of a story and the production of a particular life.

So what does it mean when an anthropologist ventures into the heady postmodernist realm to engage these issues of meaning, interpretation, situated identities, and transformative narratives? I think the best way to respond is, of course, through narrative—that is, to create and explicate my own transformative story, to produce my own particularized social knowledge, shaped by my experiences as a black woman (who is simultaneously mother, sister, daughter, friend), a writer, a feminist, and an anthropologist.

Many, many years ago, in a place far removed from where I live now, I set off to explore the unknown, the Other, and like every well-trained anthropology graduate student, I was armed with my anthropological toolkit, which included, among other things, an agenda: I arrived in Belize, Central America wanting to study women's grassroots organization, armed with the usual social science paraphernalia—random sample methods, questionnaires, feminist theories, theories of culture, etc., etc., etc.

While I adhered to H. Russell Bernard's Research Methods like something akin to a religious convert, what I discovered was that some of these methods simply did not work on the ground. For example, in my experience, trying to construct a random sample from an outdated census was nothing short of frustrating, while trying to fit the way women's groups organized themselves in Belize, Central America into the US/western-centric feminist paradigms of how women's organizations and support groups ought to work made little sense in the context of what I discovered in Belize.<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, as I conducted my survey, using "purposive" and "snowball" sampling methods, what intrigued me the most and captured my attention was what women talked about after my survey was completed or, rather, what they said around the corners of my questions. To explicate what I mean by "talking around the corners of my questions," I refer to Karen Sacks's critique of the methods she used to study women involved in a labor strike. Identifying some of the limitations of survey questions in eliciting rich data, Sacks observes: "[T]he questions I posed to the women were sociological, and women responded in that mode, giving me answers that linked sociological variables to personal militance." She concludes, "[T]heir answers were as abstract and uninformative as my own thinking."<sup>4</sup> I experienced a similar situation in Belize. I, too, found when I confined myself to formulaic survey questions or attempted to elicit responses to standard demographic queries, I received formulaic and short uninteresting responses in exchange. When I relaxed, however, and sat with women at kitchen tables or spoke with men at bars, worked in the shops with women and helped them with their sewing, cooking, and washing, their narratives disclosed much more about the politics of the "culture of gender"<sup>5</sup> than anything my survey questions could have elicited.

Sacks's point, which is also mine, is that sometimes the conventional methodological forms we use may work to obscure the very aspects of human interaction and experiences that we wish to illuminate. As a consequence of these and other encounters, in my own methodological praxis, I have come to conceptualize narrative *as a tool, as a process, as an experience, and as a form of thinking*. Understanding narrative in this way is one route out of the methodological conundrum that I have experienced and that Sacks describes.

I have found the elicitation of life histories to be an extremely effective strategy for ex-

acting data from the kind of experience-based, interpretive research I conduct. One of my baseline assumptions is a strong belief that every member of a society has some interesting perspective to offer. In Belize, I conveyed this by simply asking women: "[T]ell me what it was like growing up in Belize as a young girl," to acquire information about gender enculturation, and "[T]ell me what your life has been like," to get them to recover their lives through memories and to recitatively trace their personal history to the present moment. I think both feminist and indigenous scholars<sup>6</sup> who are interested in documenting, *salvaging*—that is, rescuing from waste, destruction, and invisibility—the richness of the past and the nuances of the present, have efficaciously used narrative in their diverse configurations of life histories, testimonios, autoethnographies, memories, and memoirs as a precise and rigorous methodological tool.

### Narrative Interpretation and Anthropology

A concern with which I grapple when applying this narrative method is: How do I effectively capture a life through this research strategy? As an anthropologist, committed to producing what Lila Abu-Lughod calls the "ethnography of the particular,"<sup>7</sup> or what those of a postmodernist tendency might term "situated" or "subjugated" ethnographies, I continuously grapple with the most originary way to *render* (as in "to depict, to translate")—and distinct from *capture* (as in "gaining control by force")—lived experience and write about it in forms that are neither anachronistic nor static. I struggle with what are the best forms to convey all the complexities, richness, layers, and contradictions that inhabit individual lives in social fields of action and that, to fall back upon C. W. Mills, link the "subjective to the political."<sup>8</sup>

One question that may plague you at this juncture is whether these are "appropriate" questions or the kinds of issues with which an anthropologist/ethnographer should concern herself. You may also be wondering: Are these mere afternoon musings, flights of fancy, fantastical whims of yet another delusional anthropologist who has had one too many field trips in tropical climates or even, more to the point, the rantings of a wannabe humanist posing as a social scientist? I assure you to the contrary and strongly assert that issues of method, textuality, and experience-based knowledge production are some of the most critical concerns of contemporary anthropology. These are the issues, I believe, that speak directly to the nature of anthropological content and epistemology, to anthropological subjects and theory, and to anthropological method and interpretation. Without a doubt, for me, these issues touch upon the very *soul* of anthropology in all its humanistic impulses.

Moreover, these are questions and issues that lie at the crux of current debates about the present and future direction of this discipline. And as George W. Stocking Jr., the discipline's historiographer, asserts, such tensions and intellectual polarizations are not new to anthropology, but rather are endemic: "Anthropology, in short, has been a discipline pulled between the pole of two radically divergent impulses, one 'scientizing; the other relativizing.'"<sup>9</sup> However, as aspirational as proposing a new approach that leans so heavily upon the tenets of postmodernism may seem, my goal is to follow the lead of Eric Wolf,<sup>10</sup> who argues, quite persuasively, that new approaches, new theories in anthropology, need not be contentious and need not be predicated on the demise of old thoughts and theories. Rather, he asserts, there is sufficient space in the intellectual forest of anthropological theories and paradigms to accommodate new thoughts and approaches.



*Nine months' pregnant. Photo by Kristen Clarke.*

### Innovators or Pettifoggers?

There is no dearth of neophytes to these new interpretive approaches to anthropology and experimental ethnography. Key scholars, such as Ruth Behar,<sup>11</sup> assert the need for a new kind of anthropology—the kind “that makes you cry.” This *visceral* anthropology is often met with hostility and tremendous resistance from others in the discipline who adhere to a more “scientific,” object-oriented anthropology. From the point of view of these latter scholars, often labeled “positivists” or “materialists,” at

this very moment, anthropology is in crisis and has gone to hell. Richard A. Shweder characterizes the debate this way:

These days in cultural anthropology, the discipline seems palpably and conspicuously divided over three very different conceptions of the field: (1) cultural anthropology as an agora for identity politics and as a platform for moral and political activism in the struggle against racism, sexism, homophobia, capitalism and colonialism; (2) cultural anthropology as an open forum for skeptical postmodern critiques of objective knowledge and ethnographic representation; and (3) cultural anthropology as a ‘positive’ (i.e., value-neutral and nonmoralizing) science designed to develop general explanatory theories and test specific hypotheses about objectively observable regularities in social

and mental life, thereby protecting the discipline from identity politics and postmodern critiques.<sup>12</sup>

In my mind, the future of anthropology lies in its capacity to embrace what George C. Stocking Jr. calls its “enduring epistemological tension.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, though there may be some who hear the death knell for positivism, I would suggest that the scientizing approach, one that Jerome Bruner<sup>14</sup> describes as “logical-scientific thinking,” is not the en-

dangered species postmodernists would like to pretend it is, that is, not as long as grant agencies continue to privilege "positivist/materialist/scientific" grant proposals over those that are more experimental/experiential/interpretive and that seek to blur the boundaries between anthropology and the humanities.

One of the chief innovators of this new humanistic/literary approach is Ruth Behar,<sup>15</sup> an anthropologist who challenges those of us who would sink into a kind of disciplinary complacency and who nostalgically, in the midst of postmodernism's antitheoretical posture, support a return to the traditional and to a past that in actuality was not as wonderful as we choose to remember and that we romanticize. Behar characterizes modern anthropology as a discipline caught in a period of indeterminacy; but it is a condition abounding with creative possibilities. Behar's mission, in this context of unpredictability, is to reconfigure anthropology, interrupt its linear trajectory, and set it upon a new path that leads to the mapping of "an intermediate space we can't quite define yet, a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life."<sup>16</sup>

In this new anthropological borderland of interpretive and reflexive anthropology, much more is required—anthropologists must acknowledge that we are nothing more (and nothing less) than "vulnerable observers" whose subjectivity is inextricable from our social observation.<sup>17</sup> If we accept this burden of responsibility, according to Behar, we are on the road toward what she advocates for herself and practices: writing a kind of anthropology that "breaks your heart."<sup>18</sup> In the process, we achieve a qualitative depth to our analysis, reach wider audiences beyond our peers, and, perhaps, just perhaps, in the case of applied anthropology, enhance the potential policy impact of research results. As Behar notes: "When you

write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably. A different set of problems and predicaments arise which would never surface in response to more detached writing."<sup>19</sup> It is this humanistic evocation that today is laying claim to its place as a legitimate heir of a contemporary anthropology under the rubric of experimental, new, and postmodern ethnography.

Notwithstanding its persuasiveness, its significance, and its appeal, this heart-breaking anthropology is not unproblematic. The most common critique, which seems to gravitate toward Behar in particular, is that vulnerable anthropology elides issues of power and inequality within the research domain by emphasizing the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of anthropology/ethnography. Yet as Nicole Polier and William Roseberry assert in their essay "Triste Tropes: Postmodern Anthropologists Encounter the Other and Discover Themselves,"<sup>20</sup> "discourses are not self-referential but are instead constructed within social fields of force, power and privilege."<sup>21</sup> In their critique of "dialogic" ethnography, they also remind us that "the ethnographic context as one of 'cooperative story making' . . . does not address the context in which discourses are situated . . . [for in] social life all 'genres, texts and voices' are not created equal. . . . [I]n the production of ethnographic texts, the ethnographer's privilege is *precisely* a discourse on the discourse."<sup>22</sup>

Specifically, the forms of power that pervade social life and determine who has the means and resources to produce narratives, or to have those narratives made public, are elusive/masked/ignored as issues in most discussions of a new anthropology. More to the point, writers such as Behar<sup>23</sup> invite critique because they often fail to link their aesthetic/humanistic agenda to a specific set of actions or any critical perspective in anthropology, a fact that leaves their work languishing more in the realm of literature than ethnography and subjects it to denouncements of "solipsism,"

flawed by a hyper-reflexivity that is more akin to "navel-gazing"<sup>24</sup> and of questionable value to anthropology. The "critical" is an inescapable and defining trait of anthropology; it is what distinguishes it from other disciplines that merely utilize cultural description. I would like to suggest that the engagement of the humanistic and the critical, the positivist and the interpretive, need not be antagonistic. Rather, they can be viewed as equal sides of a Janus-like anthropology.

Toward this end, I think Jerome Bruner, in his book *The Culture of Education*,<sup>25</sup> offers a possible bridge between these two tremendously polarized positions. Bruner, who is concerned with how individuals and cultures relate to each other, and with the role of education in that process, suggests that the human species organizes and manages knowledge in two ways, of which "one seems more specialized for treating of 'physical' things, the other for treating of people and their plights." He identifies these two ways of thinking as "logical-scientific and narrative." Bruner sees both forms as "universal," rooted in the "human genome," and "givens in the nature of language." He states that "[logical-scientific thinking and narrative thinking] . . . have varied modes of expression in different cultures, which also cultivate them differently. *No culture is without both of them, though different cultures privilege them differently.*"<sup>26</sup> Bruner's definition of narrative is one that posits it as both "a mode of thought and . . . a vehicle of meaning making."<sup>27</sup> Bruner argues that narrative, in its dualistic form, is the "glue" that produces cultural cohesion and the mental skeleton that structures individual lives.<sup>28</sup> For Bruner, the significance, power, and necessity of narrative are clear and vital: "It seems evident, then, that skill in narrative construction and narrative understanding is crucial to constructing our lives and a 'place' for ourselves in the possible world we will encounter."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the task of scholars is

also clear: "Obviously, if narrative is to be made an instrument of mind on behalf of meaning making, it requires work on our part—reading it, making it, analyzing it, understanding its craft, sensing its uses, discussing it."<sup>30</sup> Along these lines, anthropologists like Behar are well advanced. Both Behar and Bruner, thus, become starting points for me to explore my own use of narrative, especially in the interest of recouping and developing an African diaspora perspective. Borrowing from Guy A.M. Widdershoven, I would assert that "from a hermeneutic point of view, life is a process of interpretation in and through stories,"<sup>31</sup> I shall begin this explication by telling you another story.

### **A Narrative of Ethnography as Autobiographical/Biographical Discourse**

If what Michael J. Fischer asserts in his essay "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory"<sup>32</sup> is true, that "the ethnic, the ethnographer, and the cross-cultural scholar in general often begin with a personal empathetic 'dual tracking,' seeking in the other clarification for processes in the self,"<sup>33</sup> then my primary attraction to anthropology can be seen as an extension of a very personal search for the meaning of cultural identity. Central to this quest has been the use of narrative, which enables me to see culture as more than material conditions, as more than a shared set of beliefs or patterns of social relations. Culture, I argue, is a living entity that is continuously being created individually and collectively and is most frequently represented through individual life narratives.

The use of narrative has been central to the shaping of my life and scholarship as a way of understanding the experiences of the African diaspora, a place that is part memory and part geography, populated by the descen-

dants of enslaved Africans who were forced through the Middle Passage, dispersed throughout the Americas, and who endured and continue to endure patterns of economic and social stratification and exclusion as a consequence of their ancestry and phenotype. The emergence of this "narrative sensibility"<sup>34</sup> is traceable through much of my writing, which began early in life in poetic form. A powerful evocation for me of narrative as a "vehicle of meaning making"<sup>35</sup> is captured in the poem "Pearl's Song," because it shows several efforts: (1) my attempts to recover the life of an ordinary woman (my mother) in the African diaspora rendered invisible by class, race, and gender; (2) my creation of a narrative structure within which to lend coherency to the bits and pieces that I have gleaned of my mother's life over the years; and (3) my own personal journey of meaning making as I explore my relationship to this woman whom I call mother. The poem, through themes of segregation, migration, black female abandonment, invisibility, and a racialized gender continuity, creates its own geography of narrative, and thus identity—mine, hers, ours.

### Pearl's Song

1

*My mother, called Pearl  
was born in red clay country of Al-  
abama  
Sapling planted in April  
Fine brown Alabama girl, thrust out-  
ward  
into an older man's arms to escape  
red clay, jim crow and home.*

2

*She is a good singer, this woman.  
Men have known her as she leaned  
against Chicago doorways,*

*Swaying to the movements of day;  
They touched her  
hands, bronzed her face, her eyes, and  
planted seeds inside her.  
Four times she bent to drop shoots:  
twice boys, twice girls  
Fine, brown Alabama girls.  
Still no one heard her sing,  
no one watched her ooze each child  
out  
Knifing the hospital in two octaves.*

3

*Bronzecast figurine, she chiseled it  
till often I woke her song in my throat,  
Now it settles against the windows,  
dusting the curtains.  
Lately, turning into my mirror,  
I glimpse her inside  
my face, her dark eyes shut away; her  
gray hair hidden in . . . [mine].  
Standing over my stove, or seeing my-  
self in the windows of this wallpaper  
I hear her song, see it dancing in the  
wild sunlight.<sup>36</sup>*

In this biographical poem, my goal was to elicit recognition and induce understanding of the social facts that have shaped one black woman's life in the African diaspora. It is this attempt to theorize everyday life that Anne Balsamo claims, in "Rethinking Ethnography: A Work for the Feminist Imagination,"<sup>37</sup> is at the heart of feminist theory and which John Gwaltney sees as emanating from the narratives he collected of "core black culture."<sup>38</sup>

From these narratives—these analyses of the heavens, nature and humanity—it is evident that black people are building theory on every conceivable level. An internally derived, representative impression of core black culture can serve as an anthropological link between private pain, indigenous communal expression and the national market-

place of issues and ideas. These people not only know the trouble they've seen, but have profound insight into the meaning of those vicissitudes.<sup>39</sup>

In narrative then, history and biography, theory and lived experience, the individual, the local, the national and the global *all* intersect and become not atomized elements but rather discourses that are "implicated and intertwined with each other."<sup>40</sup>

### Interpreting Women's Lives

The desire to develop a narrative schema devoted to recovering the hidden lives of women of the African diaspora in other forms besides poetry actually prefigures my encounter with ethnography. It began in 1984, when I started research, under my own aegis, on the life and suicide of Leanita McClain, a black middle-class woman journalist in Chicago.<sup>41</sup> I had not yet entered anthropology and so lacked the formal terminology to describe my approach to this research; all I had at that moment was a desire to salvage, explicate, and reconstruct as much of this woman's life as I could through interviews with family and friends and through analyses of her journalistic writings, essays, and poetry—the latter neatly collected, organized, and left almost as a narrative requiem or a road map by her deathbed to guide us on the journey to reconstruct her life. As I negotiated the theoretical terrain of anthropology and feminism, I was able to create a space in which I could engage my own views on how to interpret life in the African diaspora as well as produce a critique of the inability of conventional anthropology and feminist approaches to do the same. In 1990, I reflected that critique in my essay on Leanita McClain's life and death:

When a young black woman dies, it is usually of passing interest, except to those who knew her. When the same black woman has traversed the usual social boundaries and established a place for herself in professional and political spheres traditionally occupied by white males, then her death calls our attention to questions about her life. This is true of Leanita McClain, a gifted black journalist who worked for the *Chicago Tribune*. By studying her life I hope to bring out the contradictory elements that emerge as a result of the complex interactions of race, class, and gender and the positioning of the individual in the construction of social reality.<sup>42</sup>

Using the life history method, my goal was to employ narrative as a "tool of inquiry,"<sup>43</sup> as a way of deriving meaning from the suicide of a black middle-class professional woman whose life seemed to embody the American Dream paradigm of success and achievement, a paradigm that ultimately offered her little immunity from clashes with sexual, racial, and class barriers. By examining the narratives imbedded in interviews with family and friends, Leanita's own poetry, journalistic writings, and personal letters to friends, I hoped to "make sense" out of how an individual's personal understandings of race, class, and gender inequality informed her decision about survival, about sustaining the will to live.

To some extent, this exploration of Leanita's life is also an exercise in autoethnography, which Alice Deck sees as an "introspective personal engagement" wherein "authors rely upon their native ethnographic knowledge to assemble a portrait that is a combination of personal memories (autobiographical) and general cultural descriptions (ethnography)."<sup>44</sup> This conflation of personal experience, memory, and biography are possible because my story and Leanita Mc-



Clain's are interconnected. We lived in the same city, were of the same generation, attended the same high school, worked on school events together, and had mutual high-school friends. Thus, however I reconstruct the Chicago of McClain's past, it is invariably filtered through my own memories of what it was like to grow up in inner-city Chicago in the 1960s. Also, lurking behind each question I posed explicitly to the people who knew Leanita was a silent, implicit question of my own: Why or how had I survived the madness and she had not? Ruthellen Josselson argues that "narrative approaches to understanding bring the researcher more closely into the investigative process than do quantitative and statistical methods,"<sup>45</sup> and feminist scholars, like Sandra Harding,<sup>46</sup> assert the absolute necessity of feminist researchers locating themselves in the same research plane as the women they study. I was able to bring these two perspectives together in my study of Leanita McClain.

As a result of trying to document and interpret McClain's life and death, I would venture one step beyond both Josselson and Harding to suggest that the researcher becomes a crucial part of the social action of narration at the moment it occurs by entering into a dialogic relationship with the other person, resulting in what Widdershoven, citing Hans Georg Gadamer, calls a "fusion of horizons."<sup>47</sup> Although Gadamer is referring to texts and readers, Widdershoven argues that this "theory of interpretation can be applied to the relation between experience and story in individual life. In telling stories about past experiences, we

try to make clear what these experiences mean."<sup>48</sup> Thus, "interpretation . . . [emerges] as a form of dialogue in which both participants try to come to grips with the truth in a process of mutual understanding."<sup>49</sup> This constitutive sharing was evident during my fieldwork in Belize, where I collected narratives in order to understand the "culture of gender"<sup>50</sup> that prevailed in that country. The following excerpt from my field notes gives some indication of my growing awareness of the narrative process as dialogic:

Life history informants are not just found, they are made. In the engagement between interviewer and interviewees, something clicks. In the process of asking survey questions, I looked for a level of self-reflection and thoughtfulness. Even if the informant has little schooling, you can tell that they've given thought to their lives. It is "awareness," "consciousness" if you will, that lets you know intuitively that there is a story.<sup>51</sup>

Of course, the engagement with Leanita McClain is somewhat unusual because she is no

longer alive, but I assert there is still a conversation, a dialogue, an engagement occurring nonetheless.

I am fully aware that when writing a life based on documents, partial letters, interviews re-

corded immediately after the trauma of her death, the account is likely to be incomplete in many respects. Moreover, suspicions may abound in the reader: After all, how could I know how to interpret anything I discovered or heard? In an early essay based on Leanita's life, I tried to anticipate and respond to the

**In our life we are constantly citing ourselves and others, thus creating new patterns of meaning. Life itself is an infinite process of *différance*, creating ever new texts and contexts.**

questions and address the implicit skepticism that most certainly emerges when reconstructing a life. To a large extent, I default to Clifford Geertz's belief that anthropology is at best an imprecise "science," which should have as its main goal not explanation but interpretation.<sup>52</sup>

I have taken Leanita's life and writings and tried to interpret them in a way that is meaningful to her particular situation but that also places her within history. Some may disagree over whether I have accurately discerned the "truth" of Leanita's life. To them, I can only respond that in the dialogic process there is no single truth but rather many voices, each telling only what they know.<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, I concur with Geertz that ethnographic descriptions are at best representations and *not* truths.<sup>54</sup> That is, even when dealing with living people, who are predictably unpredictable, we as ethnographers, biographers, and historians can *never really know*. It is precisely for this reason that I aim in narrative works not to capture truths but rather to explore meaning. In this sense, I am aligned with Widdershoven, who interprets Jacques Derrida as saying that there is neither "origin nor continuity in the history of interpretation."<sup>55</sup> According to Widdershoven, Derrida rejects the idea of fixed meanings in texts and argues instead for a "principle of *intertextuality*,"<sup>56</sup> in which new meanings are constantly produced. As Widdershoven explains: "In our life we are constantly citing ourselves and others, thus creating new patterns of meaning. Life itself is an infinite process of *différance*, creating ever new texts and contexts."<sup>57</sup> Derrida's belief that there is no ultimate continuity in individual life stories but ever-emerging instances of divergences as the narrative is brought into "a new web of relations"<sup>58</sup> suggests that the type of certainty

and replicability that a "scientific" approach requires is unattainable when studying people.

Much of what I learned during the process of recovering Leanita McClain's life narrative proved to be of immense value to me when I conducted fieldwork in Belize. In this new context, I was not only interested in documenting and recording women's voices and listening to the sounds of their lives, I was also interested in the relationship between the individual and her community. What I hoped to achieve was clarity about the relationships between the individual, the local, the national, and global social processes. I also wanted to understand how these processes create and sustain the culture of gender. As was the case with Leanita, I also sought to understand by what mechanisms individuals achieved empowerment (a sense of personal autonomy) as they negotiated cultural constraints. Although I focused initially on women of the African diaspora, which in Belize meant Creole and Garifuna, in recognition of the country's ethnic heterogeneity, I cast my net wider and included East Indian women (another group whose voices were frequently invisible in local and national political discourses) as well in my research.

Upon completion of my fieldwork and during the process of writing the dissertation *Women and the Culture of Gender in Belize, Central America*,<sup>59</sup> and eventually the ethnography *Women of Belize*,<sup>60</sup> I struggled always to contextualize the corpus of my data (women's narratives) in several dimensions: in relation to my own lived experiences as a black woman anthropologist, in relation to the communities in which these women lived with their family and friends, in relation to the national agenda of development and nation building, and in relation to global concerns about women and gender inequality in the world. To achieve these ends, I constantly



*Extended family. Photo by Philippe Cheng.*

mediated between an emic (insider's) and an etic (outsider's) perspective. As a reflexive anthropologist, I was aware of my involvement in the narrative process and tried to remain vigilant about what my impact was on the production of the narratives. The conscious negotiation of self, subject, and research objectives are perhaps most evident in the narrative entitled "A Birthday Celebration." It is my "arrival story" to my field site and is a direct transcription of field notes recorded at that moment.

This experience took place less than forty-eight hours after I arrived in Lemongrass. It illustrated for me, in a vivid way, the problems and issues that women face in this

country and gave me insights into the ways in which the gender system in Belize is constructed and maintained by both men and women. Listening to Evelyn, Elana, and their friends, I learned that in Lemongrass women's value, either ascribed or self-attributed, comes from the degree to which they conform to social norms of a "good wife or mother" and the degree to which they contribute to the society through reproduction and social reproduction. . . .

Any other incidents I encountered in Belize make it clear, as many feminist scholars have argued, that gender is far more than an analytical construct or a structural form. Gender, far from being an abstract concept, is a pervasive set of obligations and limita-

**Feminism argues that all interpretive practices, including those inherent in ethnographic research and writing, are political acts that forge links between history and biographies for all participants.**

tions that saturate the entire being and make up one's identity.<sup>61</sup>

What all of this suggests to me is that narrative, as "a mode of thought and . . . a vehicle of meaning making,"<sup>62</sup> is one of the most significant ways in which we acquire insights into understanding the role of culture in structuring the human condition and achieve understanding of the human response to the social facts of class, race, gender, and other forms of oppression. Explication of the social and of human agency, through ethnography, I think, is one the most significant contributions of anthropological inquiry.

### **Service Ethnography**

If there was ever a contested domain in anthropology today, it must surely be ethnography. Scholars like James Clifford have described ethnographies as "fictions," that are, by definition, "inherently partial," unpredictable and uncontrollable, and imbued with a destiny of their own making.<sup>63</sup> He explains, "[E]ven the best ethnographic texts' serious, true fictions are systems, or economies of truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control."<sup>64</sup> Polier and Roseberry also have something to say on the matter. Highly critical of postmodern turns in ethnography, they see the new forms as lacking in "contextualization and representativeness," which they assert are more important than current emphasis upon "artistic production."<sup>65</sup> "In

grafting a literary conceptual framework onto social analysis, a sleight-of-hand is accomplished: it becomes possible to analyze ethnography just as one would a work of fiction. . . . In the end, using literature as more of an homologue than a limited analogue mystifies more than it illuminates the practice and process of social research."<sup>66</sup> Finally, Polier and Roseberry caution against what they see as the most problematic, and extreme, aspect of these new approaches to ethnography, "an attitude [that] can lead to an individualistic and self-centered approach . . . [in which] ethnography is reduced to personal therapy."<sup>67</sup>

Such critiques of experimental forms are not only legitimate but necessary if we are to create new ways of writing about human experience. Moreover, Polier and Roseberry's desire for an approach in which there is "a sophisticated consideration of the intellectual, institutional and political forces that shape and constrain the ethnographic encounter and the production and consumption of knowledge in the late twentieth-century academy"<sup>68</sup> is certainly consistent with my own perspective. However, they spend so much time critiquing the new that little attention is given to mapping out a strategy for producing the kind of ethnographies they desire. They do suggest that such an approach should blend postmodernist thought and world-systems theory in order to produce ethnographies that view "anthropological subjects within combined and contradictory historical processes,

processes that should be seen as at once determinate (they are established in particular fields of power) and contingent (the fields of power, as historical products themselves, are subject to change and transformation)."<sup>69</sup> It is toward the production of just such an ethnography that I aim in my salvaging of narratives in the African diaspora.

My own ethnographic strategy borrows heavily from feminist approaches to ethnography that, according to Balsamo, "delineate ways in which we can think anew the simultaneous construction of the personal and the cultural, the one and the many."<sup>70</sup> Balsamo explains, "Feminism argues that all interpretive practices, including those inherent in ethnographic research and writing, are political acts that forge links between history and biographies for all participants."<sup>71</sup> This perspective is quite similar to that articulated by Filomina Chioma Steady in her African feminism, in which she posits that "[i]n Africa, as well as in the diaspora, the black women engaged in research on the black woman are involved in a process of liberation, as well as in scholarly endeavor, since research, being essentially a product of the power structure, has sometimes been used as a tool of domination."<sup>72</sup> I can envision no worthier task for anthropology, ethnography, or narrative than in the service of decolonizing scholarship and rescuing from destruction and waste the cultural lives, daily experiences, and social action of the people who constitute the African diaspora.

## Notes

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their insightful comments. I assume full responsibility for how I have applied these in my work.

1. McClaurin 1996, p. 47.
2. Chase 1995, p. 2.
3. McClaurin 1995, 1996.
4. Sacks 1989, p. 88.
5. McClaurin 1993.
6. cf. Abu-Lughod 1998; Behar 1993; Cole 1991; Davison 1989; Limon 1991; McClaurin 1996; Wekker 1992.
7. Abu-Lughod 1991.
8. Balsamo 1990, p. 45.
9. Stocking 1991, p. 23.
10. Wolf 1990.
11. Behar 1997.
12. Shweder 1996, p. 1.
13. Stocking 1992, 279.
14. Bruner 1996.
15. Behar 1997, 1995, 1993.
16. Behar 1997, p. 174.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 5-6.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
20. Polier and Roseberry 1989.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 251-252. Emphasis in the original.
23. Behar 1993; Behar 1995; Behar 1997.
24. In *The Vulnerable Observer*, Behar takes an opportunity to respond to critiques of her work by scholars like Daphne Patai ("Sick and Tired of Nouveau Solipsism," Point of View essay in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 23, 1994). Behar defends her form of style in the following way: "The charge that all variants of vulnerable writing that have blossomed in the last two decades are self-serving and superficial, full of unnecessary guilt or excessive bravado, stems from an unwillingness to even consider the possibility that a personal voice, if creatively used, can lead the reader, not into miniature bubbles of navel-gazing, but into the enormous sea of serious social issues" (Behar 1997, p. 14).
25. Bruner 1996.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40. Emphasis added.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
31. Widdershoven 1993, p. 2.
32. Fischer 1986.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
34. Bruner 1996.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
36. Irma McClaurin, *Pearl's Song* (Detroit: Lotus Press, 1988). Reprinted with permission of author.
37. Balsamo 1990.
38. Gwaltney 1980.
39. *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

40. Balsamo 1990, p. 46.
41. McClaurin-Allen 1990.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 315.
43. Josselson and Lieblich 1995, p. x.
44. Deck 1990, p. 238.
45. Josselson and Lieblich 1995, p. ix.
46. Harding 1987.
47. Widdershoven 1993, p. 13.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*
50. McClaurin 1993, 1996.
51. McClaurin 1996, pp. 9-10.
52. Geertz 1973.
53. McClaurin-Allen 1990, p. 330.
54. Geertz 1973.
55. Widdershoven 1993, p. 14.
56. *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.
57. *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
59. McClaurin 1993.
60. McClaurin 1996.
61. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-21.
62. Bruner 1996.
63. Clifford and Marcus 1986, p. 6-7.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
65. Polier and Roseberry 1989, p. 255.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 255.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 246.
69. *Ibid.*, p. 258.
70. Balsamo 1990, p. 56.
71. *Ibid.*
72. Steady 1987, p. 4.

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## Anthropology, Ethnography, and Women's Narratives

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