

Through the Rearview Mirror Reflections on Ethnography from The Edge of Fiction

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Mexican taxi drivers: amateur ethnographers of their own culture.

What do Mexican taxis have in common with the Internet? Instead of a virtual chat room, imagine a kind of mobile discursive space where you can step in and out of a collective conversation about the topics of the day. And the server is the taxi driver himself (“*su servidor*”), an amateur ethnographer of his own culture and self-appointed storyteller. Sound like a novel?

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Some years ago I realized that whenever I took a taxi in Mexico, I would learn more about what was going on locally and even nationally than from any other single source. Sometimes the conversations were so engaging that it was hard to get out of the taxi. Once I had tapped the driver’s wealth of information and opinion, it wasn’t easy to stop the flow, and I would find myself still listening at each stage of trying to exit the cab—even standing at the open door to hear the end of the story. I was especially taken with taxi drivers’ gift for storytelling and the love of

conversation that often overpowered the urgency of looking for work and keeping the taxi moving. And so began my relationship with taxis and the ethnographic research for my bilingual book, *Por el espejo retrovisor/Through the Rearview Mirror*, which at some point during the process of writing turned into a novel.

The book was published last fall in Mexico, but I am continually reminded that it isn’t really finished. Nor is it really mine. In Mexico it seems that everyone has had experience with taxis, and most have their own stories to add

to the collection. I especially enjoy telling taxi drivers about the book to see what reaction I will get. They are almost always eager to tell me their stories, and usually do so with great style and passion. In the words of one *taxista*:

“I’ve been driving taxis for 23 years. I have lived some incredible stories. If I told them, they would leave you with your mouth open and your eyes wide. If I were to write a journal, for example, people just wouldn’t believe it. They would say it was a novel.”

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In both its ethnographic and fictional aspects, this book was and clearly still is a collective project. Its themes invoke universal yet profoundly personal experiences of conversation and storytelling from within the anonymous but intimate space of the taxi.

Everyone talks about the danger of hailing taxis on the street, especially the green and white “*bochos*” that are the most economical and prevalent. I have heard all kinds of stories and I generally warn my students not to take them. However, I often find myself in a position where I need to get somewhere quickly and these taxis are the easiest solution at hand. I have never had a bad experience with them, nor even failed to have a great conversation. Recently I got in one of these taxis with my 83-year-old mother, and thought to myself that this could be the time that would justify all those admonitions. Statistically it was bound to hap-

pen sometime. But we were soon involved in a wonderful conversation about the meaning of life and religion, and I mentioned my book. Suddenly the car broke down and the driver managed to pull to the side of the busy six-lane highway. After getting out and inspecting the engine, he came back shaking his head to give us the news. “I’m so very sorry, *señora*, but you will have to take another taxi,” he said as he helped us out of the car. He then hurried to flag down a taxi and led us across the street, holding the

traffic while we passed. After making sure that we were settled, he shook his head and apologized again, adding “What a pity, we were having such a wonderful conversation.” He seemed to have forgotten his stalled car, the heavy traffic, and the general struggle to make ends meet in his disappointment over the loss of the conversation.

There are special moments of encounter in a taxi —moments that are so vivid that they become suspended in a kind of fictional bubble that can be replayed and reread in the mind as if outside of time. Although the conversation is moving through the very real traffic and topics of daily life, these “freeze-frame” moments seem to envelop it all —the research, the writing, the casual conversation about the book—in a larger fictional field; as though it were all part of a novel. On one recent occasion I had again taken my chances with a “*bocho*” taxi, although not with-

out precautions. As I got in, a Mexican friend of mine said loudly not to worry, that she had written down the driver’s ID number. The *taxista* smiled at me in the mirror and sighed. “Ah, *señora*, we all have to pay for the sins of a few, no?” That began a warm and animated conversation without need of an introduction. He talked of his life as a taxi driver and I told him about my book. He was fascinated and began to tell some of his own stories that could have been included. Suddenly he paused to look at me in the mirror. “What is the title of your book, *señora*?” he asked. “*Through the Rearview Mirror*,” I answered smiling. His eyes lit up as we met in the mirror with the shared understanding that both of us were part of a larger story. The threads of connection between us were stronger at that moment than our obvious differences. I have learned from these encounters to take seriously the phrase on the side mirror, *Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear*.

But perhaps I should start at the beginning of the story. The project began in the early 1990s as an ethnographic one, a study of the lives of taxi drivers in a small provincial city in central Mexico. Three students went with me to Mexico and we talked to many different groups related to the taxi business. We took a lot of taxis. Through casual conversations we heard their opinions on the topics of the day and collected their stories. Over the next several years I returned to Mexico often and the conversations continued. As time went on, the stories began to take on the shape of fiction and the project grew organically as a disciplinary hybrid, fertilized by my interests in current theoretical discussions of representing culture in both literature

and ethnography. In recent decades, there has been rising interest in writing from the border regions between traditional disciplines. The socio-literature of testimonial narrative has found itself alongside oral history, journalistic and ethnographic fiction and other collaborative interdisciplinary texts. The multiple perspectives, fragmented narrative and metafictional self-examination that characterize much of postmodern writing raise questions about who should tell the stories, with what authority and for whom. The process of writing is revealed in these texts and the reader is invited to participate in the construction of the narrative. Even in formal academic writing the challenge has been not only to write the definitive interpretation of the text or object studied, but also to examine the influence of one's own perspective in the process.

These multiple visions and meta-commentary have become common markers of postmodern literature and have also impacted ethnographic writing. The essays in *Writing Culture*,¹ for instance, look at ethnographic discourse through the lens of literary textual analysis, developing new models of postmodern ethnography. Kamala Visweswaran writes more recently in her *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*² about the close ties between literary forms and anthropological writing; discussing both the fictions of ethnography and the idea of fiction as ethnography. In her essay "Betrayal," she uses a dramaturgical form as a way of revealing and even subverting relations of power by exposing their unfolding in the telling of the story. The writer is on stage with the actors, constructing and deconstructing her text as we read.

The focus of traditional ethnography was to interpret another culture, to translate it for the understanding and elucidation of the modern world. To "organize the chaotic reality" as Bronislaw Malinowski said, "subordinating it to the laws of science."³ Postmodern ethnography, in the words of Stephen Tyler, privileges discourse and dialogue over text and monologue, and emphasizes the cooperative and collaborative nature of the study over the ideology of the transcendental observer. The ethnographer tries to

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understand another culture through the eyes and experiences of the people of that culture. The story that is written is a dialogue between the vision from within the culture of the "informants" and the observations from without by the ethnographer. The text that emerges is a weaving of the story of a culture, the story of the experience of the ethnographer in writing the text, and the reflection of the identity of the latter on the text. It is a discursive experience. James Clifford suggests that culture is a relational concept, "an inscription of communicative processes that exist historically between subjects in relations of power."⁴ It is a montage of voices and conversations, a continually present dialogue. Instead of fixed points of observing and being observed, it is a discursive space that is mobile and relational.

A symbol *par excellence* of this mobile discursive space is the ubiquitous

taxi that is found in the very center of daily life in many parts of Latin America. Since many Mexicans don't own cars, they must rely heavily on public transportation, and taxis make up as much as half of the traffic on the street in towns such as the one represented in the book. As storytellers and guides to the cultural landscape, taxi drivers often become important mediators of information and opinion. There seems to be a natural forum in the taxi business for exchange of information and opinion, a kind of collective conversa-

tion that keeps its finger on the pulse of the times and the continual construction of Mexican identities. Often leading multiple lives, *taxistas* represent many walks of life, and working as they do at the crossroads of a culture, they become entangled in the unfolding dramas of all sectors of society. Perhaps also a mariachi, teacher, *campesino*, mechanic, butcher, former gymnast, soccer coach, fisherman, or small businessman, for example, they may become involved in adventures of romantic intrigue, kidnapping, political corruption, prostitution, robbery, as well as performing small acts of kindness and heroism in the daily life of their community. For some, driving a taxi is a transition, a temporary substitute for something else that has failed. Or perhaps a way to make a little extra money on the side during a lean period. For others, it is a way of life, a constant, at times desperate, strug-

gle to survive. “Times are hard, *señora*”, I heard over and over, followed by the familiar refrain “*Esto ya no es negocio*” (You can’t make money at this anymore). A few seem to enjoy a reasonably good income and they appreciate the freedom their job offers them. Whatever their experience, *taxistas* are there in the middle of modern life; observing, listening, interpreting and telling stories.

Over a number of years I collected stories, conversations, opinions and cultural interpretations from my behind-

“encounters the other in relation to itself, while seeing itself as other.”⁵ Thus, in postmodern or self-reflective ethnography, the rhetoric of objectivity of traditional ethnography gives way to autobiography and ironic self-portrait.

This reflective experience of writing ethnography can be personally profound. One sees one’s own otherness reflected in the eyes of the other. I am other because they see me as such. The look of the other defines us, as Sartre said. But I am also other be-

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the-wheel ethnographic partners. Not only did I quickly become aware of their positions as ethnographers within their own culture, I also realized that I was often their captive informant as well as a traveling reader of their stories. When faced with the question of how to write my book, it became clear that I would not be able to leave the back seat of the taxi. The ethnographer/author doubles as both director of the play and actor in it, seeing her own image reflected in the rearview mirror as she tries to write about the other.

Frederic Jameson writes about a kind of self-observation in the process of interpreting another culture. As we struggle to understand the other, we end up interpreting our own culture and the position from which we are observing. The text comments on its own commentary. Clifford also refers to this metacommentary in his discussion of reflective ethnography, which

cause I am no longer the same person as before. The encounter transforms me and I leave my own fingerprints on the situation that I study. Vincent Crapanzano discusses the paradox of the ethnographer like that of the translator, of trying to make the foreign familiar, while still preserving its very foreignness. But what happens when the foreign ceases to seem foreign? When the ethnographer finds her own place in the conversations and complex relationships of another culture, does she stop translating? Or does she begin to translate herself? In Mexico I have discovered an “other” in myself, a part of me that has a different voice and sees a different image in the mirror. “We are all others,” wrote a friend of mine in a song. “*Todos somos otros — los otros, nos-otros, vos-otros...*”⁶ We study the other to discover our own otherness. We recognize (or re-cognize) ourselves in the mirror of another cul-

ture. Through the intimate dialogue with that culture, subject and object are confused and the writer becomes a character in her own work.

While riding around in taxis researching the book, I couldn’t escape the feeling of being in a postmodern novel infused with the magical-literary quality of daily life in Mexico. Everything was always already there; the fragmentation and multivocality of the text, the mobile discursive perspectives, the absent center signified by the mirror in which the reader’s image is reflected, the commodification of everything, the encounter with the other and continued re-fashioning of identity against the backdrop of late capitalist economic relations. I wrote about what I saw and heard and the stories I was told. I also imagined other stories. But my imagination could never outdo the wild inventions of reality in Mexico. And my informants/literary characters moved easily back and forth across the hazy border between ethnography and fiction so as to confound even the author. A few real-life characters inserted themselves into the story. One such character, already legendary in the town, hardly needed literary embellishment to make her “well-rounded” or “fleshed out.” In the early stages of the project, when I had three students working with me on the research, the two male students went with a Mexican friend of mine to a late night hangout in the red light district of the town, known as the “*Zona de tolerancia*”. (There is even a bus route called “*foco rojo*” —“red light”— whose final destination is the famous “Las Vegas” of the town.) A popular place for taxi drivers to gather after work, we were told in no uncertain terms that the only women who entered there were “going to

work”, so we decided that only the men would go. When they entered the bar, a woman, who they later learned was the senior prostitute, quickly greeted them. “Did you come to interview me?” She asks them. “Everyone does, you know.” So what could I do? I had no choice but to let her into my book.

After the book was published, another real-life character (a mariachi-taxista) walked into a store to buy a copy of the book, asking for a discount because he was in it. I would not be too surprised if Zapata himself appeared to claim his very real part in the story. Some *taxistas* have since told me that I left an important story out of the book, the one about the phantom passenger. As the story goes, along a certain stretch of road leading out of town a mysterious

woman stops taxis to catch a ride. Later when the driver turns to talk to her, she has vanished. Whether or not she is “real” is less important to them than the truth of the story, of which they were all convinced. I have often felt like that phantom passenger, imagining my way in and out of taxis and blurring the lines of definition between the actual and the possible, the text and the pretext. The book has grown beyond its covers now, to be revised and retold with each new encounter in a taxi. I find it hard to resist raising my hand to catch just one more ride, one more conversation through the rearview mirror. The reflections in that mirror help us see pictures of who we are, framed against the backdrop of where we’re going. Our realities and our dreams are reflected in

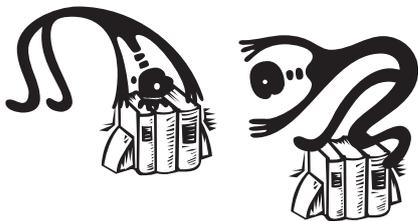
the eyes of others. We see them as they see us, our eyes meeting in the mirror in the very act of seeing. **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
- ² Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
- ³ Bronislaw Malinowski as quoted in Trinh Min-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Post-coloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 56.
- ⁴ James Clifford, “Partial Truths”, James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., op. cit., p. 15.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- ⁶ Gray Cox, “Todos somos otros”, 1990, unpublished song.

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