

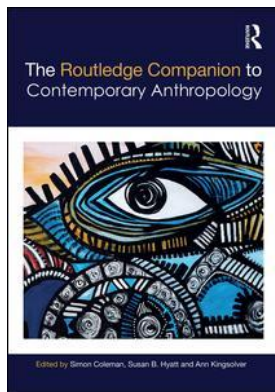
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3

PARTICIPATING, OBSERVING, WITNESSING

Deborah Reed-Danahay

This chapter is about the framing of the anthropologist's role in ethnographic fieldwork and in writing based on such fieldwork. The history of anthropology can be located in both natural science approaches and in travel, with the idea of going to some place to study some people being a very general foundation for what it means to do ethnography. The idea of participant observation, moreover, involves encounters with those people and some degree of personal experience in their way of life. And when we "get back home," we write about those people and those encounters in ways that are meant to speak to and be read by a broad audience—which can include not only other anthropologists and other academics, but also the general public, policy makers, and the people we wrote about. Increasingly, anthropologists are conscious of the changing nature of what it means to participate and to observe in a contemporary world of globalization and migration, of virtual worlds and other new technologies, and of violence and human suffering. Questions have arisen about what we should be observing and how we should be participating under these circumstances.

This chapter will focus on tropes of distance and involvement that have historically surrounded discussions of participant observation. After some historical reflections regarding these themes, I will turn to the growing use of a vocabulary associated with "witnessing" in discussions of fieldwork and some variations it can take. I will end with a consideration of the ways in which witnessing can entail a dual sense of the observer and the participant and thereby does not resolve the ongoing subjective versus objective dichotomy that characterizes anthropological discourse, and which is discussed further below.

Participant observation: some historical reflections

The dominant genealogical narrative of ethnographic fieldwork is that it involves a combination of participating and observing ("participant-observation") that can be traced to Bronislaw Malinowski's (1922) research on the Trobriand Islands. References to Malinowski in discussions of the history of participant-observation in anthropology are standard, even though he did not use this term himself. In her obituary of Malinowski published in the journal *Man*, Audrey Richards (1943: 2) noted that "he spent what was then an unusually long period of time in a single community, and quickly began to abandon the fixed interview and the native interpreter for the participant observation that is more common nowadays." Hortense Powdermaker, who

studied with Malinowski and later did fieldwork in Africa and in the United States, argued that anthropology was a “humanistic science” (1966: 306). The anthropologist’s stance, for her, was a blend of “involvement and detachment” (ibid.: 295), and this was expressed in the title of her book *Stranger and Friend: The Way of an Anthropologist*. Powdermaker (ibid.: 285) summed up the history of participant observation by writing that it “was forged in the study of small homogeneous societies, in which the anthropologist lived for an extended period of time, participated in them, learned the language, interviewed, and constantly observed.” Among her various research projects was one in Hollywood. This work presented the greatest challenges to participant observation research, Powdermaker laments, “because no physical community existed” (ibid.: 288). We can see her struggling in her reflections on this experience to deal with issues much more common in contemporary anthropological fieldwork and, in a sense, to let go of the ideal-type ethnography in which she was invested. There were also issues of maintaining emotional distance for her during this fieldwork. The assumption that people live in stable physical communities and that this is the best unit for anthropological research is one that is increasingly difficult to maintain. The notion of intensive fieldwork associated with Malinowski was one that came to privilege ideas of one group of people living in one place, even though his own research detailed much travel, trade, and communication across the islands in the Trobriands that he studied. Ideas of participating and observing arose within a framework assuming a demarcated social sphere which a lone anthropologist could somehow experience first-hand while also observing, in order to bring back these observations to be shared with others “at home.”

In an overview of British anthropology, the well-known Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth notes (2005: 14–16) that Seligman, Rivers, and the Torres Straits Expedition set the stage for the type of “intensive” ethnographic research more fully realized by Malinowski. According to Barth (ibid.: 18), “Malinowski became the formulator, epitome and propaganda for the new kind of ethnographic data” that was based on field practice of “participation.” There were, however, other currents of anthropology that supported the development of participant observation. In France, for example, Marcel Mauss was an advocate for ethnographic fieldwork and trained many ethnographers who conducted intensive research in French colonies—notably Marcel Griaule, Léopold Sabatier, and Maurice Leenhardt (see Parkin 2005; Parkin and de Sales 2010; James and Allen 1998). Parkin and de Sales note (2010: 5–6) that as French anthropology became institutionalized, it initially wanted to distance itself from empirical methods used by folklore, so that fieldwork by professional anthropologists became common later in French than in British or American traditions. The emphasis on theory in French anthropology reached its apex with structuralism. Claude Lévi-Strauss’s book *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) is a compelling travelogue and reflection upon both the “modern” world and those it may leave behind, but it is not an account of participant observation research (see Reed-Danahay 2004 and 2005), and privileges “the view from afar.” An important turning point away from this emphasis on the objective observer in French anthropology was the publication of Jeanne Favret-Saada’s book *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage* (1980 [1977]), in which she characterizes her position as being “caught” in local witchcraft practices and writes that she was compelled to be viewed as a participant during her ethnographic research in western France.

In the United States, as Sydel Silverman writes (2005: 261), the emphasis in the Boasian tradition on “disappearing native cultures” led not to participant observation but to interviews and recording of languages and texts in research among elders. Silverman (ibid.: 268) credits Margaret Mead with being the first American to adopt the sort of participant observation methods associated with Malinowski in her early work in Samoa. Roger Sanjek (1990) cites Frank Cushing, however, as an earlier participant observer (learning the language, living in a pueblo, paying attention to everyday activities) in his work among the Zuni in the late 1800s,

much earlier than Malinowski and in contrast to Boas. In her historical overview of participant observation, Rosalie Wax (1971: 33) notes that “there is little evidence in Boas’s letters that he himself did much participant observation research or learned any native language well.” She also points out (*ibid.*: 34–36) that some early American anthropologists of the generation after Boas (Lowie, Kroeber, Mead) did participant observation research, but that since Malinowski was the first to write about his fieldwork experiences in detail and explicitly promoted these research techniques, he became most closely associated with this method. After Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard (1940) wrote briefly about his encounters with the Nuer during fieldwork, and then such anthropologists as Alice Lee Marriott (1952), Laura Bohannan (Bowen 1954), Gerald Berreman (1962), Kenneth Read (1965), and Hortense Powdermaker (1966) started a trend of more extensive autobiographical writing about experiences during what had come to be known as participant observation research. These forms of writing have come to be known as “reflexive” (see Ruby [1982] for early appraisals of this approach). As Jennifer Platt notes (1983: 388), a very early explicit mention of and reflection upon participant observation methods was published by Florence R. Kluckhohn (1940), who wrote about the fieldwork she conducted with her husband Clyde among the Navajo. Florence Kluckhohn asserted that “participant observation is conscious and systematic sharing, in so far as circumstances permit, in the life-activities and, on occasion, in the interests and affects of a group of persons” (1940: 331). In foreshadowing the type of reflexive and critical approach to ethnography that has become more prevalent since the 1980s, Kluckhohn maintains that in the dual role of participant and observer, “objectivity, far from being sacrificed, is increased. The investigator, forced to analyze his own roles, is, on the one hand, less misled by the myth of complete objectivity in social research and, on the other, more consciously aware of his own biases” (*ibid.*: 343).

Participation has always been in an uneasy relationship with observation in the moral career of ethnography. Questions about how much to participate in the field and what that should mean are part of the involvement and detachment dilemma facing many researchers. Kuklick (2011) has usefully traced the rising status of ethnographic fieldwork as opposed to so-called “armchair” scholarship. “The characteristics of fieldwork that had once made it dirty work,” she writes, “now made it a purifying ordeal” (*ibid.*: 13) through a changing Victorian mindset that saw fieldwork as a form of “moral education,” much like other forms of travel to unfamiliar places. The endurance of the former view is evident in Clyde Kluckhohn’s (1943: 213) obituary of Malinowski, where he writes that “while ‘dirt ethnology’ and participant observation were not invented by Malinowski, he set a superlative example along these lines and advertised their merits.” Associations of fieldwork and dirt seem to have long left reflections on ethnographic writing, and it is archaeological fieldwork that would more immediately come to mind in this type of association today. The juxtaposition of dirt and ethnology, however, signals the messiness of ethnographic research. More common in recent approaches has been an ennobling view of fieldwork associated with this emphasis on participation.

Fieldwork came to be seen as an ordeal that would “test and build character,” according to Kuklick (2011: 14), and this led to the heroic model in which rapport and empathy became standard ideals of interaction with the people studied. The predominant narrative about fieldwork and ethnography in contemporary times is a linear one of increasing reflexivity, increasing “I-witnessing” (Geertz 1988), whereby the anthropologist as hero or heroine has developed greater depths of introspection and in many cases empathy with their research participants. As Barbara Tedlock (1991: 69) has described it, “this simultaneously empathetic, yet distancing, methodology, which is widely believed by ethnographers to produce data that somehow reflect the native’s own point of view, in time became the principal mode of production for anthropological knowledge.”

The issue of empathy in fieldwork is one that has nevertheless had strong critics, notably Clifford Geertz and Pierre Bourdieu. Geertz called it into question in his classic essay (1974) on the concept of “the native point of view,” that phrase introduced by Malinowski and bearing so much symbolic weight in anthropology. By deploying the distinction between “experience-far” and “experience-near” concepts, Geertz argues that our task is not to seek “fellow feeling” and “communion” with the people among whom we do fieldwork (which is an illusion in any case); rather it is to understand how they see themselves through their public symbols and displays of meaning.

The tensions between involvement and detachment were also expressed, in a slightly different register, by Bourdieu, who advocated “participant objectivation,” writing that “one does not have to choose between participant observation, necessarily fictitious immersion in a foreign milieu, and the objectivism of the ‘gaze from afar’ of an observer who remains as remote from himself as from his object” (2003: 282). The task of participant observation is difficult, according to Bourdieu, because it demands a “doubling of consciousness.” “How,” he asks, “can one be subject and object, the one who acts and the one who, as it were, watches himself acting?” (ibid.: 281). The aim of participant objectivation is not to uncover the “lived experience” of those among whom one does fieldwork; rather, it is to understand the “social conditions of possibility” of their experience, including the limits on it (ibid.: 282). Bourdieu also argued that anthropologists should objectify themselves and their social positioning as scholars, in order to understand fully their assumptions about the world and to be aware that they have a particular way of seeing the world that is not shared by their informants (who do not objectify in the same way) and therefore not impose this upon the informants. It is a form of reflexivity that helps one to see more “objectively” those whom we study. To use the vocabulary adopted by Geertz, it is about not imposing our experience-far concepts on their experience-near concepts, even while we seek to understand the world with those concepts.

The involvement and detachment dilemma has been explored in “narrative ethnography” wherein anthropologists increasingly produce writing about their experiences in the field so as to interrupt the division between the experience of the fieldwork and the “data” produced there. The idea of the neutral observer has been questioned increasingly since the 1980s in anthropology. Tedlock (1991: 78) argues that “beginning in the 1970s, there was a shift in emphasis from participant observation to the observation of participation.” She sees this as a shift from a division between the ethnographic monograph and the ethnographic memoir to a new hybrid form of writing, narrative ethnography, which combines the ethnographic analysis and the experiences of the fieldworker in one text. For Tedlock, this new genre marks a significant epistemological development and arose primarily as audiences for anthropological writing expanded and as anthropologists become more engaged with their publics. Tedlock notes the explosion of both monographs and edited volumes on ethnographic fieldwork experiences in the 1980s.

Despite the textual and narrative “turns” and experimental trends in anthropology since the 1980s (captured by the two volumes *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* [Clifford and Marcus 1986] and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* [Marcus and Fischer 1986]), there are many anthropologists still doing experiential fieldwork and writing about it. When I wrote a review essay on autobiographical writing by ethnographers that was originally published in 2001 (Reed-Danahay 2007), I assumed that this trend had peaked. Since that time, however, there has been a steady production of writing on the process of and experiences during fieldwork. The tension between closeness and distance in ethnography is expressed in several recent edited collections. Hume and Mulcock (2004: xi) caution, for example, that “Good participant observation thus requires a self-conscious balance between intimacy with, and distance from, the individuals we are seeking to understand.”

Contributions to this literature in the early twenty-first century have posed questions about how participant observation research can be framed in terms of location when the idea of going to isolated and bounded sites is no longer possible or a claim to virtue, about the nature of collaboration in fieldwork, and about the blurring or maintenance of boundaries between the personal and the professional “self” during fieldwork (cf. Amit 2000; De Soto and Dudwick 2000; Hume and Mulcock 2004; Coleman and Collins 2006; Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006; McLean and Leibling 2007; Halstead, Hirsch, and Okely 2008; Collins and Gallinat 2010; Davies and Spencer 2010; and Coleman and Collins 2011).

Fieldwork as encounter

Seeing fieldwork and participant observation in terms of an “encounter” has been an attempt to move beyond concerns about spatial or interpersonal distance that characterize discussions of such work. Johannes Fabian (1983) has famously chastised anthropology for positioning those we study as distanced in time through their distance in space. Since he wrote his treatise *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, anthropologists have been increasingly sensitive to the imperialist origins of our discipline and to the need to maintain a perspective of coevalness and contemporality with the people we study. The idea of the fieldwork encounter in early ethnographic writing reinforced the idea of going and being someplace else. George Marcus (2007: 1134) notes that the enduring ethnographic “scene of encounter within the tale of fieldwork,” goes back to Malinowski’s (1922) “Imagine yourself, suddenly set down...” The idea of the ethnographic encounter has, Marcus argues, nevertheless developed more recently into a way of setting the scene not only to reinforce the “being there” quality of ethnography but also to capture contemporary disruptions and displacements of ethnography in multi-sited fieldwork.

The idea of “ethnography as a species of encounter with the observer as part of the subject” (Anderson 1986: 64; cf. Kluckhohn 1940) is prominent in the genre of narrative ethnography that started to appear in the 1970s (e.g. Rabinow 1977; Crapanzano 1980). Crapanzano (1980: 151) framed his interactions with Tuhami and with his research assistant Lhacen in terms of encounter and asks toward the end of his book: “How did it come to pass that I, an American anthropologist, should have met Tuhami, a Moroccan tilemaker and entered so deeply into his life and allowed him to enter so deeply into my own?” For Crapanzano, the “ethnographic encounter” is about intersubjectivity and yet it also respects, as he writes, the “mystery” of the Other. The advantage of encounters in the field for intersubjective understanding has also been mentioned by other more recent writers. For example, Elizabeth Krause (2005: 593) reveals that in her research on low fertility in Italy, she did not expect the “encounters with peasants” that eventually caused her to see the strong role that the figure of the peasant plays in what she calls “family-making practices.” She argues (ibid.: 595) for a view of ethnography as a “space of encounters” that has an improvisational aspect of “structured spontaneity,” and where “the term encounter points to entities that are at odds with one another” and can lead to an opening up of “new possible worlds.” In a form of narrative ethnography that shares aspects of the process of knowledge production in the field through somewhat unexpected “encounters” with peasants and peasant memories in Italy, Krause positions herself as an observer who is “part of the subject” of the ethnography.

In a recent edited volume that calls for a renewed commitment to experiential ethnography and to “the fieldwork encounter,” Borneman and Hammoudi (2009: 20) suggest that “objectivities-in-progress are possible only if ethnographers reestablish a critical distance from the people and processes they study.” They see the fieldwork experience as “engagement with

both Being There and with forms of distancing that help make cultural difference visible” (ibid.: 19). Borneman and Hammoudi are scornful of approaches in anthropology that place theoretical and rhetorical claims above experience in the field. It is in the unexpected and unplanned encounters in the field, they argue, echoing Krause’s work in Italy and Crapanzano’s with Tuhami, that an unsettling event occurs which opens up new perspectives for both the anthropologist and their indigenous interlocutor. In many ways these approaches are close to Bourdieu’s idea of participant objectivation, in that they argue for an encounter that is a form of critical reflexivity and calls into question the anthropologist’s assumptions, providing distance from them in productive ways. This sense of encounter implies the coevalness (sharing of time and space) that is essential to a collaborative view of the ways knowledge is constructed in the field.

Another, related use of encounter is one that calls attention to broader social processes, collisions, and connections. In her multi-sited ethnography of global connections as viewed from the rainforests of Indonesia, Anna Tsing (2005: xi) adopts the concept of “friction” to capture what she calls “zones of cultural friction” that arise out of “encounters and interactions.” An example of this is in her fieldwork among Indonesian student “nature lovers” whom she interviewed and among whom she hiked up Mt. Merapi. She sees their sensibilities and understandings of the environment in terms of global and local encounters. In Tsing’s writing, it is not so much the anthropologist’s meeting with interlocutors that is foregrounded, but the encounters observed (or witnessed) by the anthropologist.

The participant observer as witness

Historian Joan Scott (1991) has written about “the evidence of experience” as a form of documentation of history, especially forms of life that were previously hidden from history. This is connected, as she notes, to the idea of the witness and, as Raymond Williams (1985: 128) has written, “the notion of experience as subjective witness is offered not only as truth, but as the most authentic kind of truth,” as “the ground for all (subsequent) reasoning and analysis.” This newer privileging of experience is connected, Williams argues, to Protestant reliance on “religious experiences” as forms of witness to truth. Participation is thereby associated with experience, and witnessing is viewed as a form of participation. The idea that being a witness is a form of experience entails co-presence, whereby one can enter into another’s world through forms of encounter. The witness, in order to be trusted as authentic, must engage through experience.

We are in what Wieviorka (2006) has termed “the era of the witness” in her book on Holocaust testimony. The recent growth of writing about the anthropologist as witness must, therefore, be placed within a wider framework in which various “witness regimes” (Givoni 2013) have broadened the idea of witnessing associated with legal and religious testimony to an ethical stance now adopted by various social actors—from journalists to anthropologists to political activists.

The uses and meaning of testimony and witnessing in humanitarian organizations have been explored by Didier Fassin (2011) in his book *Humanitarian Reason*. Fassin explains that there are two Latin words for “witness”—one (*testis*) is more focused on the observer and the other (*superstes*) on the participant, so that “one testifies on the basis of his observation, the other on the basis of his experience” (ibid.: 204). The first is listened to because of his or her neutrality and role as “objective” witness external to “the scene”; whereas *superstes* is listened to because s/he is more “subjective” and suffered as victim of the event. These bipolar positions are, Fassin argues, becoming increasingly blurred, even though “the witness, in the sense of the *superstes*, has become a figure of our time” (ibid.: 205). Although Fassin brings up these features of the

figure of the witness in order to trace developments in humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross and Doctors without Borders, his discussion also has implications for rhetorics of witnessing in anthropology. His etymological tracings of the term display the tensions between objective observer and subjective participant that have marked ethnography. By calling attention to the privileging of the witness in contemporary times, Fassin is also underscoring this importance of experience, as earlier noted by Raymond Williams, for authority.

In a collection of essays published in the journal *Cultural Anthropology* during his tenure as editor during its first six years, George Marcus (1992) identified an “emerging genre of witnessing/reportage” among anthropologists through his discussions of articles by Orin Starn and Enrique Mayers on political violence in Peru. In two subsequent essays, Marcus has elaborated upon the figure of the “anthropologist as witness” (Marcus 2005 and 2010). He argues that almost all contemporary anthropology takes place in settings influenced by what he calls post-Cold War “regimes of intervention.” These include (2005: 32) “international multilateral authorities” such as nongovernmental organizations, humanitarian and other aid organizations, social movements, political parties, armed factions, and so on. A new form of “disinterest” must be cultivated during research when fieldwork is dominated by these regimes, which have their own reporters, witnesses, policy analysts, and narratives. His argument is that the anthropologist is the sole figure who is “liminal” in these policy discussions and so must assume a more independent and “disinterested” stance in claims of knowledge production, based on fieldwork experiences.

There are three possible “identity poses” for an anthropologist under these circumstances, argues Marcus: that of the expert, that of the journalist, and that of the witness (2005: 34; see also 2010). He chooses the focus on the witness. Witnessing in contexts of regimes of intervention takes two rhetorical forms. The first is testimony, in which “accountings and narratives of suffering, victimhood and injustices take center place” (2005: 43). This form “stays close to the classic documentary function of ethnography” (ibid.: 43). The second form, he writes, is “a more intellectualized and conceptually abstracted account or narrative of the emergence of new orders, techniques, structures and social/cultural forms coming into being” (ibid.: 43). According to Marcus, “in both forms the anthropologist as scholar remains a classic bystander as witness who in one or another genre witnesses in detachment, despite the moral power of his or her rhetoric” (ibid.: 43). Marcus believes that: “The identity of witness preserves as much as possible the kind of detachment to which I believe even the most committed anthropology is still deeply bound” (ibid.: 43–44). He gives as one example the study done by Amitav Ghosh (1994) on UN peacekeeping missions in which “his mode is that of an observer witnessing the emergence of new forms of governmentality in failed or failing states” (Marcus 2005: 39). Marcus characterizes Ghosh as “an observant traveler with the sensibility of an anthropologist” (ibid.: 39–40).

Marcus writes that “the witness in Western law is the truthful observer based on what she or he can describe as having seen rather than heard” (ibid.: 37). This type of legal authority resting upon the idea of the expert is not, however, the basis for the authority of the anthropologist as witness, he argues. Rather, the experience of fieldwork lends a more sacred aspect to their witnessing, a form of transcendent knowledge placing the anthropological witness between the realms of the legal and the sacred. Here, the division between participant experiencing and observer is combined in the figure of the witness. For Marcus, however, the observations of the witness are less engaged and more “disinterested.” At the end of his essay (ibid.: 45), Marcus concludes that being a detached witness is a form of activism, in that it produces an “independent voice” and a way to promote and protect anthropological insights in the face of challenges from the regimes of intervention. Marcus’s view of the detached witness minimizes the role of the ethnographer as participant that has characterized other recent perspectives on the witness role for anthropologists.

Witnessing as experience, participation, and engagement

On the basis of his experience of altered consciousness during a death divination ritual among the Sisala of Ghana, Bruce Grindal (1983: 76) argues that “to truly to witness such an event precludes one’s being a detached observer.” Grindal’s approach privileges the “experience” of witnessing. He uses the language of witnessing repeatedly in his personal account of the ritual: “Near midnight came a moment in which I saw before my eyes and felt within my body a phenomenon totally unnatural to my previous experience—I ‘witnessed’ the raising of the dead” (ibid.: 60). It is only through “the ethnographic art of participant observation” (ibid.: 76), according to Grindal, that an anthropologist can acquire the knowledge and experience needed to understand death divination. For Grindal, participant observation implies witnessing, and witnessing is not a detached act of observation but an experiential form of participation.

The privileging of narrative expressions of experience as a form of witnessing can be found in the work of Ruth Behar, who sees ethnography as the chronicling of stories. She has written (2003: 16) that “there is a strange hunger for ethnography in the contemporary world, which is shaped by concepts of the ‘really real’ and the desire for stories based on the truth and urgency of witnessing.” With the phrase “the vulnerable observer” used to frame the role of the ethnographer/anthropologist, Behar calls attention to the emotional aspects of fieldwork. She labels the photographer Rolf Carlé “the vulnerable observer par excellence” after he put down his camera, while shooting the aftermath of an avalanche in Colombia, in order to embrace a young girl buried in the mud (Behar 1996: 1). This incident is from a short story by Isabel Allende. For Behar, Carlé “incarnates the central dilemma of all efforts at witnessing” (ibid.: 1), in which the impulse to record a traumatic event can be in tension with the impulse to intervene. Behar focuses on the experiences recounted in the stories of those she encounters during fieldwork and also on her own essay form of writing as an “act of personal witness” (ibid.: 20).

In her research among Detroit inner-city residents with HIV/AIDS, Sylvie Tourigny (2004) performs what she refers to as “high-risk” ethnography and she came into close contact with gang members, drug deals, and shootings. She writes: “I tagged along, listening in and observing and asking questions and challenging interpretations until I felt respondents’ realities were as much my own as possible, a process I call ‘empathic witnessing.’” She sees ethnography as a form of documentation of reality, of witnessing, and of understanding “the participant’s point of view” (ibid.: 124), so that entering into threatening situations that are part of everyday life for her informants is essential to empathy. In common with Grindal, Tourigny sees her experience in the field as one that helped her gain this perspective and be an empathetic witness. For Behar, it is hearing and then telling the stories of people such as the Mexican street peddler, Esperanza, the subject of her book *Translated Woman* (1983), which provides the witnessing role of the anthropologist. In these three examples, the anthropologist assumes the role of witness through a spiritual experience that is a deep form of participation (Grindal), through writing essays that entail a form of bearing witness to forms of human suffering (Behar), and through experiences leading to profound empathy for populations living in precarious and dangerous circumstances (Tourigny).

The framing of fieldwork as a form of “witnessing” has been particularly noticeable since the 1990s—especially in research on “social suffering” (cf. Kleinman, Das and Lock 1997; Bourdieu et al. 1996). This literature has raised important questions about how we can understand the violence and trauma experienced by our interlocutors and has provided critical analyses of the uses of ideas of witnessing and testimony in discourses and practices associated with humanitarianism and human rights (Redfield 2006; Fassin 2011). Ethnography as a form of witnessing

(and the figure of the anthropologist as witness) has been particularly visible in research on tragic circumstances and events.

In order to develop methods for contemporary ethnographies of violence and the state, Veena Das focuses on the ways in which violence is connected to what she calls “the descent into the ordinary.” In her book *Life and Words* (2007), Das details research among Punjabi women in India whose lives have been marked by the violence toward women during and after the Partition of India and Pakistan and its aftermath. She also writes of her own fieldwork experiences during the violence following the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984. Das is interested in subjective experiences of violence and the ways it tests the limits of the world as known. She raises questions about “what it is to write an ethnography of violence—one that is not seen as bearing an objective witness to the events as much as trying to locate the subject through the experience of such limits” (ibid.: 5).

In her work, Das differentiates between the witness of violence, forms of witnessing, and the anthropologist as witness to violent events either directly or via their interlocutors. She notes the presence of ideas in classic Indian literature about the need for women, in particular, to bear witness to death in order for it to be a “good death.” Finding parallels to this in Greece, Das draws upon Nadia Seremetakis’s (1991) work on Greek mourning rituals to discuss notions of “good death” and “bad death,” wherein women must witness death (through lament) in order to give voice to something silent. The “silent death is the asocial ‘bad death’” (Das 2007: 48). Das uses this to discuss the silences following the violence of the Partition when the “work of mourning” could not be carried out because women have been “abducted, raped, and condemned to a social death” (ibid.: 48). She writes also that whereas women’s mutilated and dead bodies bore “passive witness” to violence, attempts to recover narratives of violence can be problematic because sometimes they cannot be voiced. In this way, Das challenges the privileging of narrative as the major way to recover or “witness” trauma. In her portraits of women such as Asha, she underscores the legacy of violence as not just what happened to women directly, but in “what they had to witness—namely, the possibility of betrayal coded in their everyday relations” (ibid.: 72). The violence of communal riots (as happened both after the Partition and after the assassination of Gandhi) can create bonds, Das writes, but can also threaten to break intimate kin relations. This is what Das means by “the descent into the everyday.” She defines witnessing for the women she interviewed as “engaging in everyday life while holding the poisonous knowledge of violation, betrayal and the wounded self from seeping into the sociality of everyday life” (ibid.: 102).

Das poses the question of how best to do an ethnography of the state and “be responsive to suffering” (2007: 207). She writes:

This is how I see the public role of anthropology: acting on the double register in which we offer evidence that contests the official amnesia and systematic acts of making evidence disappear, but also witnessing the descent into the everyday through which victims and survivors affirm the possibility of life by removing it from the circulation of words gone wild—leading words home, so to speak.” (ibid.: 221)

The role of the anthropologist as witness is more prominently at the center of Nancy Scheper-Hughes’ (1995) approach to fieldwork in what she calls “extreme situations.” Scheper-Hughes has argued for a “barefoot anthropology” and a “womanly-hearted anthropology” that constitute an anthropology of witnessing as a moral philosophy. She rejects the act of observation in which the anthropologist is neutral spectator, seeing witnessing as something which “positions the anthropologist inside human events as a responsible, reflexive, and morally committed human

being, one who will ‘take sides’ and make judgments ...” (ibid.: 419). In her article “The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology” (1995), Scheper-Hughes marks her fieldwork among poor shantytown women in Northeast Brazil (see also Scheper-Hughes 1992) as a turning point in her movement from a more “traditional” idea of the anthropologist as “objective observer of the human condition” (1995: 410) to a morally engaged anthropologist. The women became angry with her for not joining them in their struggles and taking a more active role in fighting for better conditions for them. She overcame her initial reluctance to do so and eventually, she writes, “divided my time (and my loyalties) between anthropology and political work ...” (ibid.: 411). In her ethnography of the violence of infant mortality in Brazil, she views her role as that of “being there” and “bearing witness” (1992: 286) to the sufferings of mothers and babies by documenting the rates of infant mortality and the poverty experienced by the mothers.

Scheper-Hughes views participant observation as “an act of witnessing” and the writing of ethnography as something that makes others (readers) “party to the act of witnessing” (1992: xii). She sees herself, using a vocabulary of friendship among women from her fieldwork in Brazil, as a *companheira*. Her approach is similar to Ruth Behar’s in that Behar also positions herself as *comadre* to Esperanza in *Translated Woman* (1993). And although both anthropologists see their writing as a form of witnessing and reject objectivist claims for ethnography, Behar’s activism is primarily performed through her writing and self-revelations as the “vulnerable observer” (Behar 1996). Scheper-Hughes sees her role as witness not only in terms of her written documentation, but also in terms of engagement through direct political participation. Veena Das refuses the objective/subjective dichotomy which informs the work of Behar and Scheper-Hughes (who both claim the impossibility of detachment), seeking to understand at the level of everyday life the public forms of violence she and her interlocutors witness. Das does not reject activism, however, and her fieldwork during the riots after the assassination of Indira Gandhi was conducted while she also was acting to help survivors of violence as part of a rescue group (2007: 13). These examples of witnessing all depend on the “being there” quality of the fieldwork encounter. There is, however, another emerging view of the witness that does not depend on co-location.

Virtual witnessing and co-presence

Concepts of “virtual witnessing” have been recently discussed in ethnographic research in STS (Science and Technology Studies), but the concept is not something only relevant to the study of the Internet and virtual worlds, as one might expect. Historian of science Stephen Shapin (1985) uses the concept of “virtual witnessing” in his discussion of the literary devices used by a seventeenth-century experimental scientist and inventor of an air-pump, Robert Boyle. This is of interest to anthropology because Boyle used textual strategies not dissimilar to those used by ethnographers to convince readers who were not present at his research of his claims to authority and to the validity of his research. For Shapin (1985: 491), virtual witnessing involves “the production in a reader’s mind of such an image of an experimental scene as obviates the necessity for either its direct witness or its replication.” The reliability of scientific experiments, according to Boyle, was usually based on multiple witnesses to the original experiment and their testimony of its validity, or on witnesses to replications of the experiment. Boyle, however, also found a third way and that was through texts. He employed several devices, with much in common with ethnographic texts seeking to validate the “being there” aspect of fieldwork and the authority of the ethnographer. He used visual representations of the experiments (elaborate drawings and diagrams). More importantly, he sought to convince the reader of his

authority by writing about failed experiments and by displaying claims to “modesty” in his writing. His literary techniques “served to portray the author as a disinterested observer and his accounts as unclouded and undistorted mirrors of nature. Such an author gave the signs of a man whose testimony was reliable” (ibid.: 497). Autoethnographic “tales from the field,” in which anthropologists modestly recount their mistakes and stumbles during participant observation research, likewise attempt to convince the reader of the reliability of the author by unveiling their recognition that sometimes there are also failures. In doing so, readers become virtual witnesses to the ethnographic encounter when reading ethnography or watching an ethnographic film.

Anne Beaulieu has called attention to a distinction between co-presence and co-location in ethnographic fieldwork and prefers co-presence to the term witnessing. She works in STS and argues (2010: 457) that

conceptually, co-presence foregrounds the relationship between self and other and interaction that *achieves* presence in a setting. Co-presence is an interactive accomplishment by participants and ethnographers alike, and it does not share the unidirectional and oculo-centric connotations of witnessing (Woolgar and Coopmans 2006). Most importantly, doing ethnographic research by focusing on co-presence highlights the centrality of shared meaning achieved in and through interaction.

Co-location is associated with “being in the field,” and this is not always the best way to study knowledge production in science and technology settings. Rather than seeing mediated technologies as barriers to fieldwork, Beaulieu argues, we should regard them as contemporary means of sociality. Therefore, “space, texts and infrastructures become so many resources in establishing co-presence that can be embraced as constitutive of the field” (ibid.: 458). Whereas travel has been an essential part of the classic idea of participant observation, “co-presence involves not so much the ability to travel but rather emphasizes coordination, flexibility, and availability” (ibid.: 459). She also points out that coordinating of schedules, time zones, and other commitments may be as important as co-location. Research on websites, for example, does not require travel, and these sites are also available to many others who are not anthropologists. Consequently the idea of “being there” can no longer be a claim unique to ethnography. Beaulieu proposes that we think of the field as a site of co-presence, but not necessarily co-location in the geographic and physical sense. It is possible that the notion of “encounter” discussed above could reflect this idea of co-presence if broadened to include encounters in social spaces that are more virtual than physical.

Conclusions

In a critique of the anthropologist as witness to forms of human suffering, Asale Angel-Ajani (2006) calls into question the figure of the “noble witness” as advocated by such writers as Ruth Behar and Nancy Scheper-Hughes. Because she has done fieldwork in Italian prisons and is familiar with the legal terminology used in those contexts, Angel-Ajani is particularly sensitive to the rhetoric of the witness. Anthropological claims to witnessing are, she argues, largely about reclaiming forms of ethnographic authority, and establishing “the centrality of the anthropologist by suggesting that as a witness she not only bears witness (was there) but has testimony to give” (2006: 80). The version of the witness advocated by George Marcus, one who claims neutrality rather than emotional vulnerability or militant activism, is also connected with a view of nobleness and authority. By advocating that engaged anthropology focus more on listening,

rather than providing testimony, Angel-Ajani suggests we might open up possibilities for more critical forms of understanding.

A focus on the noble witness as a figure for the anthropologist as hero is, I suggest, yet another turn in the moral career of participant observation. Those who do fieldwork in “extreme situations” of suffering and even experience danger during fieldwork have assumed a position of moral authority within anthropology today. The idea of building moral character through fieldwork in difficult and extreme situations and by being what Scheper-Hughes calls a “barefoot” anthropologist is a theme that goes all the way through the history of participant observation. Just as anthropologists have critically examined many assumptions of participant observation research, we might do well to pay attention to the cautionary point made by Angel-Ajani, when she writes that “the act of witnessing is not as uncomplicated as is often represented” (2006: 81). Angel-Ajani follows Lisa Malkki (1997) in her observation that police work and anthropology share in vocabularies of investigation and witnessing. For Malkki, the role of listener (*ibid.*: 96), attentive to the relationship between oneself and those being studied, is a different role from that of investigator. She sees (*ibid.*: 96) these as two “different modalities of ethnography” and labels the role of the witness as one of “caring vigilance” in opposition to the other of “unlocking a mystery.” Malkki positions the witness more toward the participant side of participant observation and the investigator more toward the side of the observer.

The anthropologist as witness emerged in the context of a focus on what Joel Robbins has recently termed “the suffering subject.” Although his concern is more with what we study rather than how we do it, Robbins (2013) has provocatively argued that anthropology moved from “the savage to the suffering slot” (*ibid.*:448) since the 1990s, as our object of study moved from “the other” to “the suffering subject.” He observes that “the subject living in pain, in poverty, or under conditions of violence or oppression now very often stands at the centre of anthropological research” (*ibid.*:448). Robbins makes this point as part of his larger task of identifying a new trend toward what he calls “an anthropology of the good” in the ways in which people imagine and work toward “better worlds” (*ibid.*: 459). He does not suggest a new role for the anthropologist in this emphasis on “the good” and it may be that the trope of the witness (not discussed by Robbins) can adapt itself to work on the good. It may also be that new vocabularies for the role of the anthropologist will develop as our research topics shift.

By offering these reflections on some historical trends and more recent contributions in anthropology, I have attempted to show that by adopting a rhetoric of witnessing, anthropologists have not dissolved the long-standing tension between objectivity and subjectivity, distance and proximity, or detachment and involvement that has characterized discussions of fieldwork from the very beginning. The very term “witnessing” is related to experience, to observation, and to the act of reportage through testimony. In many ways, this points back to the autobiographical nature of anthropology and to the conundrum at the heart of our discipline—we are the instruments of research and observe ourselves and others while we participate. As Fabian (1983: 88) has written:

All anthropological writing must draw on reports resulting from some sort of concrete encounter between individual ethnographers and members of other cultures and societies. The anthropologist who does not draw on his own experience will use accounts by others. Directly or vicariously, anthropological discourse formulates knowledge that is rooted in the author’s autobiography.

He uses this idea to argue that “objectivity can never be defined in opposition to subjectivity” because “The Other” is always part of the anthropologist’s own past (*ibid.*: 89). This point is

related to the perspective adopted by Das in her understanding of the figure of the witness and the role of the anthropologist in the field. It is also present in the criticism of participant observation, with its impossible division between the participant and observer, offered by Bourdieu. All three call into question the subjective/objective division.

When we read the reports (or stories) of others, we are engaging in a form of virtual witnessing of what Fabian calls “some sort of concrete encounter” (ibid.: 88). The witness figure in anthropology adopts a certain moral authority—either as a somewhat disinterested witness or as a highly engaged and politically active witness. This signals to me that anthropologists increasingly (since Malinowski’s time) view themselves not as neutral bystanders to global processes (that are at once political, economic, and cultural) but as social agents who are affected by them and implicated in them. The growing trend identifying the anthropologist as witness reflects the same tensions surrounding distance and proximity, engagement and detachment, which have long been associated with participant observation. As the social spaces of our research change with new technologies and new topics, the emphasis on “being there” for the ethnographer may be shifting toward one of encounter and co-presence in which the dual role of observer and participant takes on new meanings.

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