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Mijal Gandelsman-Trier

Negotiating Authority: Experiences with an Interview Series in Montevideo, Uruguay

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Abstract

This article reflects on the transformation of interview experiences into an ethnographic text. Starting point is a series of interviews with a resolute elderly woman who authoritatively gave me her view on the history of Ciudad Vieja, the historic centre of Montevideo, Uruguay. In what way can the story be told? How can the elderly lady's voice and perspective be preserved and linked to my ethnographic narrative? In this paper I trace my way of maintaining the impetus of the interviewee's narrative by using her account not only as a source for findings but by embedding her statements in a vignette.

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Institut für Ethnologie
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 (West)
D-20146 Hamburg
Tel.: 040 42838 4182
E-Mail: IfE@uni-hamburg.de
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Negotiating Authority: Experiences with an Interview Series in Montevideo, Uruguay

Mijal Gandelsman-Trier

Introduction

'Write that down, please!' my interview partner Teresa told me and began to carefully dictate her view of the history of her neighbourhood.

In this paper I reflect on the way in which specific experiences from my fieldwork can be transferred into ethnographic writing. I start with a short description of the situation in the field. I met Teresa – as I want to call her here – during my fieldwork on transformation processes in the port-related quarter of Ciudad Vieja, the historic centre of Montevideo, Uruguay.[1] At the time of our encounter, Teresa was an eighty-three-year-old woman who immediately showed a strong interest in my project when I called to ask her to be my interview partner and to arrange an appointment. When I prepared our first meeting, I decided to conduct a biographic interview. I knew that Teresa had lived in Ciudad Vieja all her life and that she was very committed to the neighbourhood. It seemed appropriate to ask her about her childhood memories and the changes she perceived to have happened in the district as part of her biographical experiences. Biographical interviews open up the possibility of getting to know personal experiences and insights with significant historical depth. This aspect was of particular interest to me. I also expected that it would be a useful way in which the elderly woman could recall her experiences in the neighbourhood at different stages of her life.

Yet right from the beginning, Teresa thwarted my plans and took over the conversation. I opened our first meeting with a question about her childhood in the neighbourhood. She told me that her memories go back to 1925, when she was five years old. She took this as starting point to talk about the history of the district from her point of view. Teresa had a clear picture of how Ciudad Vieja had developed over time and she wanted to convey her perspective to me. She did not seem to believe that her personal memories and experiences were of any relevance in this. She persistently refused to deviate from her style or to digress into a biographical narrative. In our conversa-

1 The ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in Montevideo between 2003 and 2005. The study was part of a research project at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Hamburg University, on transformation processes in port cities. For further details on the research project, see Kokot et al. (2008); for further details on the research project in Montevideo, see Gandelsman-Trier (2008) and Trier (2005).

tions, there were a total of six meetings, she switched between a colloquial narrative structure and a way of speaking in which she dictated her views to me ready for printing. In each meeting, she set the topics, sometimes seamlessly taking up where she had left off the previous time. She seemed to have a clear idea of what my work would look like later.

The picture that Teresa created of Montevideo's historic centre in the twentieth century was framed by three major upheavals, which formed the structure of her narrative. She lamented the loss of public memory that had gone hand in hand with these transformations. Since the changes in Ciudad Vieja were also accompanied by a change in the quarter's population structure, she called these upheavals 'diasporas'.

The contact with Teresa was tremendously enriching for me. I was impressed by her perspective, detailed knowledge, impetus, and commitment. But this opened questions for me: How could I work with the abundance of information, points of view, and perspectives she had provided? How could I preserve Teresa's voice without either subordinating my voice to hers or letting her disappear in my ethnography? To a certain extent this is a common problem in ethnographic writing. In the case of Teresa, however, I found it particularly striking: first, because she behaved with such authority; second, because this series of six interviews formed a significant portion of my corpus of research data; and, third, because she was such an impressive person.

Although I could well comprehend the way Teresa depicted the history of Ciudad Vieja in the twentieth century, her account did not guide the way I began to think about the development of the quarter. In particular her use of the term 'diaspora' irritated me extremely. I understood it as a marker for the upheavals that had occurred but was unable to relate her use of the word to the academic concept. Therefore, I could not adopt the story as she told it as part of my account. With this decision I restored my authority over the process of writing.[2] But this measure alone was not convincing, because I did not want to suppress Teresa's voice: she should find a place in the ethnography where she could represent herself, at least to a certain extent. I did not want to use her detailed narrative only as quarry for data. It was thus important for me to give Teresa her own space in my ethnography. I use this expression to illustrate that the interviewee's perception should get a prominent place in my ethnography. I consider this 'own space' within my narrative flow a stylistic device that can also be applied to other interviewees.

In Teresa's case, 'own space' means telling *her* story, using her words in the form of long quotations, following her emphasis on events, presenting her conclusions. Teresa's story is about transformations that have taken

2 In the context of this paper I do not want to reiterate the famous debate on ethnographic authority and representation. On the subject of ethnographic authority, see, for example, Clifford (1983) or Sperber (1989); for the broader context, see the paradigmatic volume *Writing Culture*, edited by Clifford and Marcus (1986).

place in the historic district of Montevideo that Teresa calls 'diasporas' and that are linked to major changes in the physical structure of the area and the composition of the population. It was within this limited narrative space that she could speak for herself. My contribution was to contextualise her story, describe the setting, create a biographical portrait of Teresa, and introduce her as one protagonist of the neighbourhood. By joining all these elements together, narrative passages develop, which can also be denominated as vignettes, even if they are quite extensive. In the best of cases, small thick descriptions, as Geertz (1973) phrased it, emerge from those stories.

Teresa's vignette consisted of four elements that reflected on different aspects of our encounters and interactions. In the following I present the three points of contextualisation or setting, portrait, and practice. I do not go into Teresa's narrative, which I have already briefly outlined and characterised as her own space.

Context and setting

Contextualisation first of all means to introduce the reader to the particular field situation. Where and how did the encounters take place? Under what circumstances? What was the relationship between the interlocutor and the field? How did the interviewee behave? Such a description of the location can help to gain insight into the setting. This applies both to the research situation and the writing process.

During one meeting Teresa invited me to her balcony. From there a wide view of the port opened up. She told me about the past: the sounds of the port, the constant movement of people and goods. Immediately my central research topic moved much closer. It was more tangible than during our conversations in the living room. This episode illustrates that interviews and their evaluation consist of more than the analysis of the spoken words. Our understanding of our research topics arises from the interaction of our senses. We perceive many details, and they merge into, complement, and partly explain what we learn in the interviews (Ghodsee 2016: 31–39). This process should be demonstrated and incorporated into the ethnography in an exemplary way.

Within the framework of the contextualisation, small anecdotes can find a place. Teresa, for example, lived on the first floor of a house in a busy street. When I arrived for our appointments, I rang the doorbell downstairs. Teresa would open the window and throw the front door key on the sidewalk. That way she did not have to walk down the stairs, which was hard for her. I was included in her usual habit in which she received visitors. With this attitude she expressed a certain familiarity and trust, right from the very beginning. Teresa's informal behaviour of making contact with people in her environment relates to everyday practices in the local setting of the neighbourhood.

Such small facets help one get to know the interviewee more closely, at the same time as they condense an understanding of the field in the form of small mosaic pieces, however insignificant these may seem on their own. For me, Teresa's habit gained in importance because it reminded me of how other residents described life in certain areas of Ciudad Vieja as having been one of familiarity.

Biographical portrait

Biographical portraits are an appropriate stylistic device to bring a person in an ethnography closer to the readers. Kristen Ghodsee advocates introducing people in a differentiated manner, presenting them in detail – of course whilst maintaining the necessary anonymity of the person. She thus suggests: 'since personal interactions in the field drive ethnographic research, present your primary informants in three-dimensions, as real people, not as caricatures' (Ghodsee 2016: 34). She stresses the importance of locating the actors in everyday practice. Based on the focus of my research, I complement this with a localisation of the actors in the physical and imagined spaces of the district.

Teresa was a well-known and respected person in the neighbourhood. Even though I was unable to get her to give me a detailed account of her biography, I was able to gather some information about her life story in the course of the long meetings. I also learnt from other people and through written testimonies how her life had always been connected with the neighbourhood.

Teresa grew up in Ciudad Vieja and personally experienced all the phases of change in the neighbourhood that she described to me. Her life was closely interwoven with the area. Therefore, she regretted that houses and streets were torn down over time and, in her opinion, had disappeared from memory. During Uruguay's military dictatorship (1973–1985) she worked in the project group *Grupo de Estudios Urbanos* (Group for Urban Studies). One result of this work was the small book *Una ciudad sin memoria* (City without memory) (Grupo de estudios urbanos 1983). This photographic and textual survey of the situation in the historic district implied a strong criticism of the urban planning policy of the military government.

In Teresa's case it is striking that the memories told are always linked to the physical and social setting of her living environment. This applies, for example, to her early experiences in one specific zone of Ciudad Vieja that was partly demolished for the construction of the *rambla*, a waterfront promenade, as well as to her work some decades later for social services offered by the church. There she learned about the situation of people in need and was confronted with problems of unemployment, homelessness, and the life of street children. Because of her engagement, she told as an anecdote, she was able to move around the neighbourhood without any difficulties, even in

the dark. She knew many of the young people who were roaming around, and they knew her and protected her instead of robbing her.

Practice

Teresa was both a contemporary witness and an activist. Beyond everyday life in the local neighbourhood, Teresa was actively involved in the political and social concerns of the district since her youth, as the examples of her social commitment in church social welfare and her participation in the urban policy group show. It is therefore important to introduce the interviewee as an actor with her (or his) own agency. How does daily practice in the living environment look like? In what way does the interlocutor participate in the process of perception, appropriation, and transformation of the setting? Not all people intervene as directly in the process of change in their environment as Teresa, who has influenced the representation and transformation of her neighbourhood, for example through her participation in political initiatives, church organisations, and state institutions. It is obvious that Teresa has had a great interest in the renewal of Ciudad Vieja and has acted accordingly. The *analysis* of everyday life is a relevant part of anthropological research. In this context, the *description* of the practice of individuals seems a useful approach to represent everyday actions in an ethnography. Ghodsee (2016: 1) emphasises: 'Ethnography provides a qualitative method to focus on the experience of everyday life, and ethnographers literally "write culture". Unlike any other research method in the social sciences, ethnography revels in the quotidian'.

Conclusion

Teresa's example stands for itself and, at the same time, serves as an example. To sum up, my approach consists of allowing a number of key informants their own space within the framework of my ethnography. In this space, the actors can, in a way, express their own views on the subject of the ethnography. In other words, I do not restrict my narrative to biographical portraits or contextual information about the persons. Instead, the selected persons, as Teresa here, are given the opportunity of telling their own stories within my larger ethnographic narrative. This allows different approaches and perspectives on Ciudad Vieja and on processes of change in the district to emerge and create ruptures and irritations. They develop persuasive power, stand for themselves, and represent the respective actors. These stories of the interviewees are at the core of the vignettes, which give the respective persons more prominence in my ethnography. The vignettes should form a contrast to my narrative: they should not get mixed up with the flow of my argument and my writing style. Although such vignettes are intended to undermine my ethnographic authority, at least to some extent, no counter-narratives

will gain access to my story. And that stylistic device certainly does not solve the dilemma of representation. As the author, it is me who writes down the stories of the interlocutors, arranges them, and positions them in the monograph. The common practice of writing about field experiences includes the problem of the representation of others in ethnographic writing in itself – a problem that is not, in my opinion, solvable. The way of writing should, therefore, address this challenge and moderate and counteract the dilemma of representation.

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Mijal Gandelsman-Trier is lecturer at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Hamburg, Germany. Her key areas of research are migration, transnationalism, and diaspora with a focus on the Jewish diaspora, urban anthropology with a focus on port cities, and the anthropology of space and place. Her regional focus is Latin America, especially Mexico and Uruguay.

Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany

Email: mijal.trier@uni-hamburg.de