

**Doubts, compromises, and ideals:**

**attempting a reciprocal life-story**

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**Summary:**

In this article I reflect on my attempt to co-author a reciprocal life story with my friend Liria de la Cruz, a semi-literate Gypsy/Roma street seller from Madrid—a book where we examine together our intertwined stories. Much has been made of the assumed capacity of collaborative methodologies to transform ethnography for the better. Yet as Liria and I try to find ways to work together, we struggle to reconcile our reciprocal approach with the conventions of the ethnographic genre and the expectations of our scholarly audience. I reflect on our difficulties for what they reveal about the complex encounter between the non-hierarchical aims of collaboration and those of academic anthropology.

**Keywords:** collaboration, reciprocity, ethnography, friendship, life story

I want to understand the whole text that Paloma and I are writing, because as informant I think I have the right to understand everything that is written about me, and I believe that anthropologists must be able to write in a plain way so that all will be able to understand. I would like our book to be understood not only by anthropologists, but also other people who don't have that quality of understanding that way of writing. I am very interested in the support and the opinion of anthropologists, but I would like them to grasp why I also want other people to read our book, in particular women who may have gone through situations similar to mine, who have seen themselves cornered, without a helping hand. I'd like my story to give them hope. If we write our book only with anthropological words, other people who have experiences similar to mine will not be able to understand it.

These words have been written by Liria de la Cruz, a Gitana (Gypsy/Roma)<sup>1</sup> street seller from Madrid with whom I am currently trying to co-author a reciprocal life story, a book in which we examine our twenty-five years of friendship and our very different lives as Spanish women. We met in 1992 when we were both twenty-three and I, a Paya (non-Roma)<sup>2</sup> research student, was doing fieldwork in a government-built Gitano ghetto in the periphery of the city. Liria, who was a well-respected wife and mother, became one of my main informants and a good friend and I went on to publish a book and several articles about her and her community. We remained close and in 2009 I helped her elope with a Moroccan man, leaving her young family and the Gitano community. Since then she has spent periods at my home and has met my colleagues and students in Scotland, examining my life and my world just as I have done hers through the years. The book we are writing was prompted by this huge upheaval in Liria's life, and by my role in it: in it each one of us writes, about herself, the other, and the people who surround us. By reflecting together on our choices and intertwined trajectories, we hope to illuminate the constraints and possibilities that frame the lives of Spanish women, Gitanas and Payas. Doing this in a reciprocal way, we aim to challenge key divisions in anthropology—between field and academy, anthropologists and informants, 'those who do the knowing and those who are known' (Gay y Blasco and de la Cruz 2012: 1). We want to address an academic audience, producing a monograph that

will be of anthropological relevance, but to do so in a fully accessible way so that Liria herself, and hopefully others as she explains above, will also be able to read it.

With these goals in mind, we have been constructing our book around a patchwork of conversations, taped monologues, letters, and fieldnotes gathered since 1992. Both of us reflect on these materials: I type on my laptop, and Liria, who attended school only sporadically, writes laboriously in capitals, records monologues which I transcribe, or dictates to me directly. Throughout, we keep our two voices distinct and make them visible with different fonts, following Majnep and Bulmer's strategy in *Birds of my Kalam Country* (1977), an early classic of collaborative ethnography. Like other projects that deploy collaborative methodologies in ethnographic writing, ours emphasises joint text development and co-theorising but we move beyond these by foregrounding mutual investigation and analysis. We unsettle normative distinctions between observer and observed not just by writing together but by writing about both our lives.

Yet writing as Liria outlines above—reciprocally, accessibly, and placing her knowledge on a par with mine and my life on a par with hers—means that our text does not embody in easily recognisable ways key disciplinary values such as theoretical innovation or narrative flair. As Liria and I attempt to find ways to work together, we struggle to reconcile our reciprocal approach with the conventions of the ethnographic genre and the expectations of our scholarly audience—conventions and expectations that I convey to Liria to the best of my abilities. Our difficulties throw light on the complex and uncomfortable encounter between the non-hierarchical aims of collaboration and those of academic anthropology, and I explore them below. To do this I take a pause from my dialogue with Liria, addressing not her but my anthropologist colleagues, aiming to carry out work of analysis and debate that does not fit easily within the parameters of our joint undertaking. I do it with her permission. We often have long conversations through Whatsapp, and on a message she wrote, 'It's fine with me that you write about this theme in an article on your own. It doesn't interest me as much.' And later, 'We are two different people. I also talk about our book to the people of my Baptist church when you're not there. Anything that will bring attention to our book is good.' Yet as I display and examine our project in what follows, I am very aware that I risk re-inscribing the very subject-object dichotomy that my reciprocal work with Liria aims to undermine.

Much has been made of the assumed capacity of reciprocity to transform ethnographic writing, and even anthropology as a whole, for the better. Reciprocal ethnography, conceptualised as the process through which ethnographers incorporate their informants' critical perspectives on the evolving text (Lassiter 1998: 11), has been argued to improve on postmodern reflexivity by extending the 'multi-layered, polyphonic dimension of dialogue and exchange' beyond fieldwork to the writing-up stage (Lawless 1993: 60). In fact intellectual reciprocity, collaboration, and polyphony had already been claimed as elements of postmodern ethnographic writing, with Tyler proposing postmodern, single-authored ethnography as 'cooperatively evolved text' (1987: 202), and others going on to put forward similar statements (e.g. Feld 1990: 244). More recently Rappaport has extended Chow's concept of 'being-looked-at-ness' (1995: 180; in Rappaport 2007: 37), to emphasise that reciprocity is 'a fundamental element of collaboration, forcing the external ethnographer to look at herself, just as indigenous participants do' (ibid.). As folklorist Lawless did in the early 1990s, Rappaport depicts reciprocity as 'a brand of reflexivity that transcends the inward-looking and individualist thrust of North American cultural critique' (ibid.). For Lassiter too reciprocal ethnography is 'an attempt to realize more profoundly... the underlying purposes of ethnography' (2001: 142): when the collaborator's viewpoint is 'sought at every stage in the text's development,' the result is a 'much more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of how difficult representing Others (and, by extension, Self) is' (ibid. 143).

The emphasis on reciprocity thus proposes to implement the anti-colonial aims of the collaborative outlook—establishing non-hierarchical relations between ethnographer and collaborators; involving collaborators in the design and implementation of research projects; and producing outputs relevant and accessible to them—within the specific context of academic ethnographic writing. Within this framework, 'the deferral to the subjects' modes of knowing' is depicted as the means through which a 'refunctioned ethnography gains coherence' (Holmes and Marcus 2008: 82), with the 'different kind of power dynamics' involved in collaborative methodologies said to deliver 'a much richer form of ethnography' (Curran 2013: 354). There is a clear tension here, and it has been underlined by Lassiter: although reciprocal methods address 'the political disparity' between field and academy, their unacknowledged goal remains 'to create better texts, texts that are more often than not designed to impart deeper understandings of culture and

meaning for the ethnographer's colleagues, not for his or her consultants' (2001: 143).

Rappaport too has argued that the 'new kind of ethnography' that collaborative work aims to produce is 'geared largely to a scholarly readership' (2007: 22).

Whereas Lassiter's critique focused on the 'complete irrelevance' of scholarly interpretations to Ralph Kotay, the Kiowa consultant he was working with (2001: 143), from our different standpoints both Liria and I are interested in the dialogue between academic and non-academic perspectives and its potential to affect anthropology. As we present our chapters in progress to anthropological audiences, our concern is rather with the notions of value through which the worth of our work might be judged by the discipline. Ethnographic writing is considered successful if it creates 'convincing thought experiments,' but it must do so through 'well established conventions' and 'recognizable organisational techniques' (Wardle and Gay y Blasco 2011: 118). Can Liria and I indeed produce a better—or even just good enough—ethnographic life story which will be both of anthropological value and relevant and accessible to her? What should such a text look like? Of immediate practical significance to us, this is also broader question about the elasticity of the ethnographic genre, about the ways in which academic anthropology, as a mode of knowledge production fully dependent on the cooperation of our informants, might open itself to their insights and contribution. And here I am not thinking of the intellectual elites whose 'para-ethnographic tendencies' and activities Holmes and Marcus have described (2008: 84), but of research partners who, like Liria, may have had very limited access to a formal education.

Whilst trying to co-write a reciprocal monograph that will be of academic value—that is, publishable—and completely accessible to Liria, we have repeatedly confronted that old chestnut, the continued reliance of the ethnographic genre on entrenched notions of authority. I am not just talking of the expectation that the 'fieldworker-theorist' should be in charge of the 'virtuoso orchestration' of the text (Clifford 1983: 139) but of the fundamental assumption that, as a 'mode of knowing,' ethnography depends on the creation of a distinctive authorial self who provides an innovative perspective on the discipline and the world (Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2007: 141). Throughout the history of anthropology this self has consistently been constructed as singular (Clifford 1993: 120), with dialogic claims often working to shore up rather than undermine the anthropologist's agency and control over both argument and representation (Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2007: 144). The generic ways this singular self is produced and

gains legitimacy—through persuasive engagement with theoretical genealogies and debates, visible on the page as references, footnotes and quotations; and increasingly also through emotionally compelling and ‘poetically evocative’ writing (Stoller 1994: 354; Stoller 2007: 181)—is difficult to reconcile with the reciprocal ideal of full, non-hierarchical involvement of collaborators in the production of the text. Liria and I continuously meet pressure to conform to this authorial model, not just from our audiences—reviewers, editors, seminar participants—but from my own training and tendencies. Attempting to determine what a good enough reciprocal monograph would look like, we negotiate this pressure through concrete, practical compromises—about how to edit our writings, for example, or whether we should quote anthropologists whose work she has not read—which, for reasons I detail below, often yield unsatisfactory results. The problem is how to address an academic audience through reciprocally-produced text, and whether or not that audience will recognise collaborative, accessible writing as scholarly relevant. Walsh’s question regarding the point at which ‘accessibility preclude(s) communicating the complexity anthropologists try to study’ (2007: 212) is often on my mind as Liria and I attempt to determine the kinds of complexity that our reciprocal text should and can embody.

The reciprocity that Liria and I are attempting clashes with this authorial imperative in another fundamental way. Whereas Lawless (1993), Lassiter (1998), Rappaport (2005) and others deploy reciprocity as an intellectual strategy aimed primarily at yielding better knowledge of their research participants and their social and cultural worlds, Liria and I aim to scrutinise each other in the text as we have done through the years of our friendship, with my own life and understandings becoming object of analysis and depiction by Liria as much as hers by me. Warnings of over-indulgent reflexivity (Geertz 1988: 89; Bourdieu 2003: 282) and its theoretical irrelevance (Behar 1996: 14) preoccupy me, but so does the risk of shoring up the hierarchical distinction between anthropologist and informant by editing out my own vulnerability whilst treating hers as the obvious object of analysis. And, as the partner with better understanding of the expectations of the ethnographic genre and the publishing machine, I find I have to facilitate Liria’s interpretations of myself for our audience whether I agree with them or not.

At the moment, entangled in the conflicting demands of reciprocity and ethnographic writing, I am finding collaborative life story work at once immensely satisfying

and deeply intractable, more challenging than any writing I have ever undertaken, yet also more revealing of the potential of anthropology to facilitate deep mutual understanding. Below I examine my dilemmas for what they might say about the assumed capacity of reciprocity to transform the ethnographic genre and to re-orient the discipline's self-definition (Moskowitz 2015: 37), about the form and limits of such transformation, and about the practical processes through which it might be attempted. Questioning Liria's and my choice to write a monograph rather than produce a different kind of collaborative output like a documentary or a popular biography, I reflect on the potential openness of academic anthropology to those whose lives we study. Here I am less concerned with what might happen when 'they', our subjects, 'read what we write' (cf. Brettell 1993), and more with the nitty-gritty of reciprocal writing and publishing, and what it might say about key processes of institutional reproduction and their exclusionary effects. Because my—and our audience's—preoccupation with the conventions of ethnography shapes how Liria and I relate to our project, I detail some of the ways our egalitarian, non-hierarchical ideals meet the demands of academic text production and evaluation. And, whilst reflecting on the experience of being interpreted by Liria for our readers, I also confront the stubborn resilience of our roles, as anthropologist and informant, observer and observed.

### **The audience and the text: framing the reciprocal project**

Any attempt to ascertain what reciprocal knowledge production should look like must address the issue of purpose and audience: who and what are reciprocal ethnographic texts for? Partners involved in collaboration may not have the same goals 'or even understand each other's agendas' (Tsing 2005: 247). The arcane bodies of knowledge anthropologists draw upon and aim to contribute to often do not translate or are irrelevant to research participants, and the same is true of the 'publish or perish' imperative that shapes so much of what we do (Lassiter 2001: 143, 2008: 77; Moskowitz 2015: 36). Likewise, there is no intrinsic reason why we, as anthropologists, should identify with the aims of our partners. Tsing (2005: 246) talks of 'collaboration with friction at its heart' and the term fits well the different intentions that Liria and I have brought to our project: whilst both of us want to write a book and address an academic readership, our motivations and desires do not completely overlap. And the process of bringing our two perspectives into dialogue in our



working practices and our text has been complicated further as we have encountered the expectations of our academic audience regarding the form and content of ethnographic writing, in particular regarding theoretical content and elaboration.

Liria, who says she has always been fascinated by Payos (non-Gitanos), is very much drawn to the university as a sophisticated and exotic space and thoroughly enjoys giving seminars and addressing colleagues and students. She finds the idea of writing for anthropologists—educated, affluent people in a different country—very appealing and is very keen that they will appreciate our text. As a firm Evangelical, also believes that the book will serve the will of God, acting as an instrument of conversion. Keenly aware of the barriers that separate Gitanos and Payos, she thinks that telling the story of our friendship will be a model with positive social effects. She also hopes that women who have had to or are considering leaving their families will be heartened by her story. I do not share Liria's Christian faith, but do believe that examining our lives side by side will reveal something significant and new about Spanish womanhood and about the contribution of reciprocal writing to anthropology. I also need to publish in order to keep my job and progress in my career and, as with all UK academics, the scholarly worth of my work will be formally assessed and numerically ranked: as a result I am often preoccupied by the idea that our book must be seen to have academic relevance. Twenty-four years ago we were brought together by anthropology, and we both feel very much invested in it as a humanistic and cosmopolitan endeavour.

Liria has never read any anthropological texts and her knowledge of the accumulated lore of the discipline has been mediated through our joint practice and my own verbal accounts. She talks to our readers with confidence, directly and spontaneously, speaking from the heart. This is how, in the first chapter of our draft monograph, she outlines her understanding of the discipline and our project:

I learnt what anthropology was when Paloma came to live in my house. I had a vague idea of what anthropology was, but it was living together day by day, seeing Paloma's fieldwork, that I learnt its meaning. I think it is a very beautiful work that opens frontiers onto new worlds. Because it is not just writing about other people, but getting to know their lives, their customs, religions, and their ways of being. I find it fascinating, writing not only about my life, but about Paloma's life. Because I

have always been the informant, but now we are breaking the mould. We know that telling our lives, together and united, is going to be something never done before in our country: two women, a Paya and a Gitana, but very close from youth, breaking the barriers between two different levels and ways of life, although that distance never pulled us apart. Since I started writing about anthropology I have found it wonderful to have the opportunity to express my feelings towards other people, and to understand them. As I write about Paloma, I also learn to see things in a different way, especially because we two have been brought up so differently, in our customs. I know for sure that what I am doing right now is that I would like to do for the rest of my life, because getting to know people, their customs, their experiences, their sadness and their joys, and especially having another person opening their heart to you, is wonderful.<sup>3</sup>

Later on she explains why her perspective and analysis should be as prominent as mine in our book, depicting a view of anthropology in which collaborator and anthropological knowledge stand side by side:

Anthropologists study informants, and it is true they know many things about our lives. I know this because I have lived it with Paloma. But there have been times when she has not understood well our way of life, and she has misinterpreted conversations or actions of people. Besides, anthropologists depend on their informants since there are other things inside me that, unless I tell her about them, Paloma as anthropologist cannot know: how I really feel, or what I think, or how my life really is, and my custom, or what I think about her life and her customs, and about everything that surrounds us both. For this reason I think that the informant must also give her own vision of what she sees and what she thinks. Not only the anthropologist's opinion is important: there are always two voices that must be seen, what you see, and what I really feel.

As a consequence it is important for Liria to understand the text of our book fully and, as she explains in the quotation that opens this article, to ensure that non-academics might be able to read it too.

When I started writing my own section to complement Liria's account above, explaining our collaboration in the introduction to our monograph, I did it as plainly as I could, so that there would be nothing in the text that she would not find clear or relevant. With Gudeman and Rivera's statement about the capacity of inscription to close 'good conversations,' that 'belong to no-one,' to those 'without access to the written word' (1990: 1), I used the same approach we had taken in an article we published together (Gay y Blasco and de la Cruz 2013), using no jargon or citations. As a scholar, I was very much aware of the intellectual path that had led me to our project and of my indebtedness to the works of others. Yet I hoped that all these elements could remain more implicit than explicit in our text, and that academic readers would themselves be able to place our book within the theoretical landscape of the discipline. After all, making our own mental connections with literature, even literature the authors of a text have not quoted, is essential to the creative process of reading for academics. I also believed that we would make a relevant contribution to current debates regarding collaboration, gender in Spain, and Roma marginality, and decided to explain how in straight-forward language that Liria could understand. Within the draft introduction, I outlined our collaborative outlook in two brief paragraphs:

All anthropology is collaborative, but this is concealed by the many ways ethnographies exclude the very people they are about. Ethnographies are written down, often in a foreign language, and in the obscure style of academia, and they address conversations, debates, and conventions informants know little or nothing about. Ethnographies are esoteric texts that reveal to some and hide from many. Because we want to write an egalitarian, reciprocal text, and because Liria is not familiar with anthropological literature, we have decided not to quote other authors. Throughout the book we make few references to anthropological debates, such as here, and I am responsible for these interpretations. We have deliberately kept these more theoretical discussions brief and as accessible as possible. In this way, we hope that readers from different backgrounds will make their own connections with other texts, debates and experiences.

Although we are attempting an open, egalitarian and reciprocal life story, we are aware of the limits of our undertaking. The project is based on our relationship,

and we speak from our own perspectives, rather than from the point of view of the Gitanos Liria left behind in Villaverde, of her immigrant friends, or of my middle-class family and acquaintances, many of whom figure in the book. We know that the accounts of all these people would be very different from ours in some important ways. This is a collaboration between two individuals, rather than between a community or a group and an anthropologist: we leave many voices out. We may also have excluded these Gitanos, Payos and immigrants as audience, by writing an anthropology book rather than producing the kind of document that they might find more useful, relevant, or interesting—a documentary, a popular biography or a book of photographs perhaps.

Yet my hope that our text would address earlier work implicitly, and without the need for traditional props such as references and quotations, turned out to be at best risky and at worst misplaced. When I asked colleagues to comment on our draft chapters or presented them at seminars some in our audience, students in particular, were drawn to our approach. Others found it problematic, objecting to the lack of a detailed, explicit theoretical discussion. We were told that we needed ‘more clarity about the intellectual project involved here,’ and to achieve it we should explicitly address a wide variety of bodies of work, from ‘the genre of collaborative and journal-like anthropological writing’ to ‘dialogic anthropology,’ and from ‘activist-oriented scholarship’ to ‘recent work on feminist methodologies.’ The absence of quotations and references was raised repeatedly: rather than being read as a methodological choice, it was interpreted as a deliberate negation of the relevance of previous scholarship, or else as ignorance of the richness of the discipline, both serious flaws. At different times ‘a much fuller introduction,’ a prologue written by me or another anthropologist, an epilogue, appendices, extensive footnotes or endnotes, and a divided page with reciprocal text on one side and my analysis on another, were all suggested as ways of developing a theoretical discussion that would either fit or approach disciplinary conventions.

Although some of these strategies have been deployed by other authors working collaboratively or writing for non-specialist audiences, they feel unsatisfactory because they would make significant portions of the monograph inaccessible to Liria. These tactics would also position the reciprocal text—both Liria’s and my own writing—as data to be framed by

my theoretical interpretation. This is precisely the kind of deployment to which Liria objects in the quotations above, where she argues for her right to understand everything in our book, and for her voice and mine to be given equal recognition.

At stake here is not just the tension between accessibility and complexity already mentioned but the question of what complexity itself, both ethnographic and theoretical, consists of in the reciprocal context. How should complexity be encoded and recognised in collaborative texts? And, what should be its role and its value in this kind of writing and in anthropology at large (cf. Moskowitz 2015: 49ff)? More broadly, the discomfort of this section of our audience raises the issue of the place of reciprocal writing, and of collaborator knowledge, within the discipline. Is the main role of both to be consumed as data for theoretical debate amongst anthropologists—as I am consuming our joint project in this very article, *antropófaga* (cannibal) as much as *antropóloga* (anthropologist) as Rappaport states (2005: 84)? This seemed to be the opinion of those who objected to a quotation- and reference-free text. Yet am I not, as one of the reviewers for this article suggested, compromising the aims of our reciprocal work by writing it on my own and in a conventional academic style? Larger questions follow. Should *all* anthropological writing be accessible? And to whom? In what ways and to what extent can reciprocal work and collaborator insights make contributions in their own terms? And what should these terms be? As Liria and I attempt to find our own particular answers to these questions, it becomes increasingly clear that, for our project to succeed, we must persuade our audiences to reflect critically on and maybe shift their expectations of what constitutes ethnography and ethnographic knowledge. For, as Caren Kaplan argues for testimonial writing, with reciprocal work too the ‘destabilising effect... comes through reading as well as through writing; that is, our responsibility as critics lies in opening the categories so that the process of collaboration extends to reception’ (Kaplan 1998: 211).

### **The literary model: finding ways to work reciprocally**

Since Liria and I have decided to forego ‘the intellectual armour of citing precedents’ (Narayan 2007: 131) our accessible monograph will not fit scientifically-oriented models of ethnographic worth, and one obvious option is for us to turn to more literary alternatives. Indeed the nature of our material—a mixture of letters, reminiscences, taped monologues

and conversations—seems to suit this approach, and colleagues have sometimes encouraged us to strengthen the creative dimension of our work. This recommendation points to a second set of standards of value vis-à-vis which reciprocal ethnographic writing must position itself, and hence is not unproblematic. Whilst theoretical innovation has defined the ethnographic genre since Malinowski (1922: 1ff.), after postmodernism literary showmanship too has become increasingly and explicitly desirable. So Paul Stoller tells us that, to be considered good, ethnographies must ‘sensuously describe the physical attributes of the ethnographic locale and sensitively construct the character of the people who live there;’ to be memorable, they must ‘grapple with the things most fundamentally human—love and loss, fear and courage, fate and compassion’ (Stoller 2007: 180-181). In sum, in order to produce ‘ingeniously woven stories that speak to the human condition’ (ibid.: 189) ethnographers should also be accomplished literary writers. From a different standpoint, Erikson (2006) too demands narrative flair, this time as the primary avenue for anthropologists to leave the ivory tower, capture the imagination of a wider readership, and contribute to public debate.

Although achieving this ideal may not be easy for many anthropologists—‘as ethnographers, we are usually trained to set forth arguments, not to write narrative’ (Narayan 2007: 141)—approaching it when working reciprocally poses its own challenges. As an editor explained to me after kindly reading two early draft chapters, ‘it is clear that the structure of the ethnographic experience is tightly in your grip, and you are displaying a mastery of the elements of your story: what events are key, the nature of your collaboration, etc. But mastery of the elements, even mastery of the chronology, is not the same thing as mastery of the narrative.’ It is relevant that this editor choose to talk not just about ‘narrative’ but about ‘mastery’—a term that implies flair but also authority and control, two bêtes noires of the collaborative outlook. His comments embody important questions I struggle with: What should narrative mastery look like in a collaborative text? And, how are Liria and I to become competent—better yet, masterful—ethnographic storytellers, working reciprocally?

Here one set of issues relates to our different roles in the writing process. Unlike in Behar’s and Esperanza’s relationship, writing reciprocally means that, whilst I may be ‘the researcher with access to the resources of bookmaking,’ Liria is not to be a ‘translated

woman' (1993: 13). When we started writing she was in Spain and I in Scotland, and my initial impulse was to treat her primarily as a purveyor of data—texts, recordings—and to take on the role of editor and organiser, deciding on the argument, choosing which of her and my own materials to include and how to structure each chapter, aiming for the very narrative mastery the editor above told me we lacked. I believed that Liria would have no understanding of what a book should look like but also doubted my own literary abilities and my capacity to bring the project to fruition. Partly because of the distance but also not trusting her to share full responsibility for the book, I was constantly frustrated that we did not live up to the collaborative ideal. Writing like this was extremely draining. At this time I prepared a conference presentation on our work, and I wrote,

Because of my unavoidable expertise, the burden of reciprocity tends to lie with me. It is up to me to work out how to transpose the very real reciprocity that exists between us in daily life (which Liria calls complicity) into a narrative reciprocity. To borrow from Sands, I feel caught between roles and demands: between 'collector and editor, between editor and transcribed narrative, between editor and life-story conventions, and between narrator and editor and audience' (Rios and Sands 2000: 110).

It was only once we managed to spend a good stretch of time working on the book side by side, sitting at the same table, that my attitude to our project began to shift. Examining our writing in detail with Liria, reflecting together on the challenges of our project, I felt supported by her intelligence and deep understanding of the issues, and it was a relief to give up control. I believe I have managed to become a 'facilitator' rather than an 'expert' (cf. Lassiter 2008:79), providing Liria with information about anthropology and its texts so that together we can work out how to construct our monograph and determine to what extent we will attempt to approach ethnographic ideals and conventions. I do limited editorial work on Liria's writings, mostly correcting punctuation and spelling, and it is always double-checked by her, and she too makes suggestions for improving the sections that I write. As she explains in the book, 'When I go to Scotland where Paloma lives is when we tend to add, change, or debate whether what we are writing is going well or badly. Each of us makes suggestions to the other, and we plan everything together, what we put in and

what we remove.’ Almost always our time together in front of the computer is emotionally charged, as we review our lives and our choices and attempt to transform them into an ethnographic narrative for our audience. ‘Very often we laugh remembering funny things. But when I read or listen to the recordings about our conversations that we had about all that has happened to us throughout our lives I cannot help it but cry and we have to stop working until I get over it, or until the next day.’

Our working patterns mould our text, and I doubt that we will manage the narrative mastery the editor above encouraged us to attempt. This is not because my literary capacities are cramped by Liria—of the two, she is the better storyteller, both orally and in writing—but because for the moment at least our text reflects closely in form and content the process of reciprocity itself, the ways we speak and engage with each other. And so it is less polished, more circular and repetitive, less balanced than I might have desired at the start of our project. As Smith and Watson argue, it is precisely because in collaborations between less literate partners and academics ‘issues of power, trust, and narrative authority become critical’ that scholars, as co-authors and as audience, must ‘acknowledge the importance of oral cultural forms and attend to the speakerly text, rather than remain preoccupied with the writerly effects of narrative’ (Smith and Watson 1998: 28). And yet Liria and I do want to write well and capture the imagination of our readers, and the challenge for us remains how to achieve this through our particular collaborative methodology. For the fact that we work reciprocally and in non-hierarchical fashion, that our monograph will evidence through its very shape ‘the provisional and unstable nature of the cross-cultural encounter’ (Rios and Sands 2000: 259), will not alone make it compelling, convincing, or publishable.

### **Vulnerability, value and ethnographic conventions**

The difficulties I have discussed so far highlight two sets of values central to the ethnographic project—regarding theoretical sophistication and narrative mastery—and how these frame our particular attempt to write reciprocally and accessibly. Whilst all collaborative ethnographies must position themselves vis-à-vis these values, opening up the scope of research so that Liria writes about my life unsettles even further conventional anthropological divisions between observer and observed: I do not know of any other



anthropologist whose life has been analysed and narrated by their collaborator in this way. The attempt to achieve genuine mutuality in our text complicates the experience of reflexivity for Liria and for me, bringing to the fore its intersubjective dimensions as a process where knowledge of the self is re-made in conjunction with the other and the imagined audience. Although revealing and rewarding at times, both Liria and I are finding this to be difficult and disquieting at others.

The chapter of the book where the implications of taking this reciprocal approach have been most intractable for me deals with our childhood and teenage years in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The chapter is structured around two recorded conversations in which we discuss Liria's very unhappy arranged marriage at age 15, to a much older relative who was also a heroin addict; and my experiences in a conservative middle-class family, including being sexually molested by a friend of my parents from the age of 11. Since we were both born in 1969, we are talking about events that happened in parallel albeit in very different areas of Madrid, a slum and a middle-class neighbourhood. Liria and I have had versions of these two conversations several times over the years we have known each other. In this chapter, each one of us takes ownership of the other's life and explains it our readers, as anthropologists routinely do with their informants, and we reflect on the experience of being known and depicted by somebody else.

The process of emotional mutuality on which this chapter draws is not symmetrical—I tend to be more reserved than Liria—but is essential to our trust and therefore to our collaboration. I told Liria about my life just as she had told me and shown me her own life, and she insists that mine is more interesting, more dramatic and worth telling than hers (I disagree). Yet I have worried deeply about including this particular episode in the book: in spite of our collaborative aims, isn't telling my story engaging in navel-gazing, in self-indulgent exhibitionism? My doubts reflect a larger issue in reciprocal writing: how far and in what direction should 'being-looked-at-ness' be taken (cf. Rappaport 2007: 37)? What role should the process of mutual openness that is often so essential to field relations play in the reciprocal text? Once again we come to the question of value in collaborative work.

The value of Liria's vulnerability is obvious: her hardships are valuable in themselves, because she is the informant, a poor Gitano woman. We do not have to justify writing about her suffering because, after all, that is what anthropologists do: we often judge our and

others' success as fieldworkers by the depth of our informants self-revelations, and we expect to read about them in ethnographies. But what about the value of my vulnerability? Behar makes it clear: when anthropologists make their hardship, pain or fear be visible to readers, the stakes are high. It is acceptable for a conventional ethnography to be dull but a 'boring self-revelation, one that fails to move the reader, is more than embarrassing; it is humiliating... Efforts at self-revelation flop not because the personal voice has been used, but because it has been poorly used' (1996: 13-14). So the problem I have just discussed, regarding the achievement of narrative mastery, becomes even more pressing in this context of reciprocity. Behar's depiction reinforces the distinction between subject and object in ethnography that our reciprocal approach attempts to question. Her admonitions reflect a broader commonsensical understanding in anthropology at large, one that I too have internalised.

As part of her discussion of anthropologists who fail to display their vulnerability in a sufficiently skilful way, Behar argues that self-revelation has to 'take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise go. It has to be essential to the argument' (1996: 14). Liria and I decided to write about these episodes because we think that, particularly when told together, they have some significance. I believe that these stories of our childhood are important because they show how, as Spanish girls at the end of the Francoist dictatorship, our positions in the world, our subjectivities, and our outlooks were very much shaped by strong patriarchy and gender inequality, even if I lived in a middle-class neighbourhood and Liria in a Gitano slum. Putting our stories side by side highlights strong continuities between Payo and Gitano gendered experiences that are obscured by usual studies of 'Gitano culture' and 'Gitano distinctiveness', as well as by popular Spanish stereotypes. This demonstrates the methodological and analytical benefits of using a reciprocal approach to life story writing.

For Liria, on the other hand, these moments are important precisely because they are full of pathos and drama. She understands them as key moments that shaped the future direction of our lives and our way of being in the world, and as essential to the fabric of who we are as individuals and as women. And she sees the fact that we trusted each other and told each other these stories as crucial to what makes our friendship important as a relationship that breaks down boundaries between Gitanos and Payos, informant and anthropologist. For Liria it is the act of telling and listening, to each other and to the world, that is significant. For her, unlike for Behar, no further justification is necessary.

In this chapter Paloma and I we have learnt together to trust each other and to analyse the good and the bad experiences, and of course to know ourselves better. Because when we tell each other what we think about the other, according to our experience, we become aware of many of the characteristics we have as persons. Both of us have known how to grab firmly onto life, against many tempests to overcome them, above all thanks to God and to our friendship and union.

But the gaze of the audience is not the only one that both of us have to confront: there is also each other. This writing process has also been deeply uncomfortable for me because Liria's interpretations of my life sometimes differ greatly from my own, driving home the problem of the status of different kinds of knowledge in collaborative or reciprocal work, and their visibility in the text. The fact that this is such a personal chapter has made this question particularly pressing and disturbing. Take the following excerpts. In the first one, constructed from a recording, Liria interviews me asking whether I had sex with boys as a young teenager and suggesting that I did not because I had been abused:

'And you never had any sexual relationship with any of your friends, no?'

'Noooo! I had a couple of kisses with that boyfriend I had when I was thirteen, and then until much later nothing... '

'And you don't think that it may have been because of the man? Because among you Payos it's normal, it doesn't matter if you have a sexual relationship with a boyfriend!'

'Back then my mother would have died if I'd had sex! And the mothers of my girlfriends the same! Gosh, what a mess it would have been!'

'Well, if she'd found out. But inside, inside you, wasn't it because...'

'We had no clue about sex,' Paloma interrupted me. 'We were a bunch of innocents. Elena, Teresa, my friends that I used to spend time with... Some of them waited even longer than I to have sex, way longer!'

'But don't you think that maybe, if what happened to you with that man when you were little hadn't happened, don't you think that maybe you...' I insisted

because I thought that the abuse had made Paloma shy when it came to be with any boy. But she did not see it that way.

‘No, it because it was very much because we were the good ones.’ She placed a lot of importance on the atmosphere and the environment where she lived, whereas I rather thought that it had been the man. ‘Not only to do with sex, but we were the ones who studied hardest, the ones who got the best marks.’

‘But there are Payas who study very well and still, they have sex!’

‘Well, for us back then it all went together.’ Paloma was getting annoyed. ‘We were the ones who behaved well in school, and so on, who didn’t smoke. And then there was another group in the class, of three, four, five, or six, whatever, who used to sit to smoke in hiding behind the school, and we thought they did more things with boys.’

‘Yes, but...’

Whereas I made sense of my life by emphasising a social and cultural context in which ‘good girls’ did not experiment sexually, Liria’s analysis, placed further on in the chapter, is very different. Drawing on her knowledge of Paya girls living in the area where she grew up, she explains:

I think Paloma was not at all like other Payas, because they have much greater freedom than us Gitanas. Because the Payas I knew as a child, Payas from my neighborhood, most of them as teenagers they already had sex with boys. Independently of their social level or economic level, all the Paya girls I have met were the same. And I think Paloma did not go with boys, which being Paya would have been normal, because of that man, this is one of the clearest things to me, although she has never been able to see it this way, from her point of view. Because that would have been the normal thing for her as a Paya girl, to have sex with boys and go out at night. I know that inside her there is guilt, because of not having done anything to stop it when it happened.

In her exegesis Liria resists my explanation, and provides her own deeply ethnographic one, both generalising—about Payos and their gender mores—and particular,

about the specific circumstances of my own life and my psychological make-up. Her account makes me deeply uncomfortable, not just because it raises possibilities that I had never before considered and that I fear our audience will find persuasive, but because I believe that it is very much moulded by Gitano stereotypes about Payos. I have written extensively about these, arguing that the Gitanos' elaborate emphasis on the sexual promiscuity of Paya women enables them to celebrate the beauty and righteousness of their own way of life. Getting it right is important for me, not just as a woman making sense of her own past, but as an anthropologist. And so we face each other, each attempting to persuade the other and our readers and each remaining unconvinced.

Rappaport argues that collaborative work 'requires a conscious and active commitment on the part of academics to situate indigenous interpretations on an equal footing with academic analysis, to accept both hold significant—but different—truths' (2005: 85). For Sands too the role of collaboration is to 'point to the impossibility of fixity and closure even for published inscriptions' (2000: 88). In this vein, our disagreement highlights one of the key advantages of reciprocal work: it shows the nuances of our cross-cultural encounter and demonstrates the possibility to create multiple vantage points from which to look at and interpret the world. And of course it turns the tables on the anthropologist, working towards the decolonisation of anthropology that proponents of collaboration advocate: after all, I know well that Liria disagrees with many of the interpretations I have made of her life and the lives of her family and acquaintances. Yet the process is far from straight forward, not just because the destabilisation of my authority takes such a personal and cutting form, but because its outcomes are so ambiguous for me, for Liria, and for our audience too. And this is where some of the complexity of our reciprocal text lies: not in elaborate theoretical analysis, but in attempting to convey this process of knowing and not-knowing, closeness and distance, certainty and hesitation, that lies at the heart of the encounter between self and other.

### **A pause**

So, why have I written this article? Why take this pause? Anthropologists most often wait until they can conjure an illusion of completion for their work, when they can present their conclusions authoritatively and when hurdles and failures, considered retrospectively, work

to make the narrative more compelling. Reflecting on our project half way through makes it impossible for me to pretend to have a solution to the problems posed by the encounter between reciprocity and ethnographic writing, or determine where the future of collaborative research must lie. But it is the fact that we are half way through, that our success is so uncertain, that makes the urgency of these problems so plain. Speaking from experience, Lassiter says that 'collaborative research struggles within and against a multitude of simultaneous and often conflicting motives' (2008: 76), and our project certainly does. Now I can talk from the inside about these entanglements, about their difficulties and their rewards: in two or three years time they will appear very different.

There are many issues that I have not resolved, and they have to do with our project but also with collaboration, reciprocity, and their place in the discipline. I have not determined what would make a reciprocal text better than another one, or than a non-reciprocal one. I know that reciprocal work can help redefine our understanding of complexity in ethnography, its form, and its value, but I yet have to work out exactly how. And I do not know if reciprocal work should indeed attempt to be a catch-all, if Liria and I will manage to address academics and non-academics at once, and if women like the ones she has in mind—women in trouble—will ever read our book. I know that we must make our discipline open, transparent and relevant to the people we study, and also believe that we must value and preserve its intellectual depth and breadth. I do not know if our book will ever be finished, let alone published. But there is something that I do know, and this is that working with Liria has made my understanding of anthropology, of myself, and of the world so much more nuanced, and that sharing my life with her has made it so much richer. As our project goes on I hope I will have the capacity to continue taking risks, to follow through and see where writing together will take me.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gitanos are Spanish Gypsies/Roma, a community of approximately 660,000 people, 1% of the Spanish population. As elsewhere in Europe, in Spain Roma are strongly marginalized and considerably poorer than the non-Roma who surround them.

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<sup>2</sup> Payo is the name given by Gitanos to non-Gitanos. It is also used by non-Gitanos to refer to themselves when they are distinguishing themselves from Gitanos.

<sup>3</sup> Also in Gay y Blasco and de la Cruz 2012: 3.

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