

Anthropology's Epiphanies: Some Things I Learned from James Fernandez

RUTH BEHAR

*Department of Anthropology
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48109*

SUMMARY *During the course of this decade, I have been traveling incessantly to Cuba, the place of my birth and earliest childhood. One truth that stays with me is the belief, enunciated frequently by babalawos, leaders of the Afro-Cuban Santería religion, that nothing in this world happens by chance. I believe it is not by chance, but rather by the ineffable wisdom that guides us on our life's journey that I have had the good fortune to be associated with James Fernandez for the past 22 years. I know that after I received my Ph.D. and became an anthropologist in my own right, Jim and I became colleagues, but I will always be his student and always his ahijada, a goddaughter to this quite powerful babalawo of anthropology, who initiated me into the rituals of our profession. It is impossible for me to speak of Jim impersonally, as James Fernandez, or even simply textually, by citing his work, because the things I have learned from him have come to me from knowing the man and knowing the work, and the two are as inseparable as fingernail and flesh, "como uña y carne," to use a popular Spanish metaphor. I consider my article a quest to understand the meaning of mentorship—of how it is that we learn from our teachers and are given the tools to become teachers ourselves.*

I can say without exaggeration that when I entered anthropology in 1977, there was only one professor in this entire country who could envision turning the dreamy-eyed young woman I was, who wanted to write poetry but had lost faith in her voice, into an anthropologist. That professor was Jim Fernandez. When I arrived in Princeton in 1977 to study with Jim, he was well on the way to making the transition from being an anthropologist of Africa to an anthropologist of Spain. He was moving from one fieldwork site to another, moving from staying up all night in Africa observing the *Bwiti* religious revitalization movement—that sought wholeness and reconciliation between the living and the dead—to having to be up at dawn with the cow-loving and coal-mining *asturianos* of mountainous northern Spain, a region to which Jim traced his Fernandez paternity and ancestral roots. In a smaller way I wanted to make a similar transition from Africa to Spain. Under the supervision of Johannes Fabian, who had kindly put me in touch with Jim, I wrote an undergraduate senior thesis on Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* and Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*, comparing and contrasting their colonized and colonizer memoirs of Africa. Under Jim's guidance, I sought to become an anthropologist of Spain, a place I had first visited on a semester abroad program as a Spanish literature student, seeking traces of Cervantes and Golden Age high culture.

It was to the Spain of humble country folk that Jim would open my eyes. And it was to the village of Santa María del Monte, a fervently Catholic hamlet in León, to which he would bring the Jewish Cuban girl of Sephardic lineage to find her first home away from home, her first site of fieldwork, her first intimate bond to the country abandoned centuries before by her Sephardic ancestors when they were forced to choose between conversion or expulsion. My arrival in Santa

María del Monte in 1978 is no doubt as etched in Jim's mind as it is in mine: it was a moment redolent with the search for home. The local schoolteacher had arranged for a family to take me in, but we arrived on a weekend when she was away in her village, and no one seemed to have any idea where an anthropologist, inappropriately attired for a rural sojourn in her long skirt and lace blouse, was supposed to stay. Jim was determined I would begin fieldwork that very day. He soon persuaded a man fixing an irrigation pipe at the entrance to the village to find temporary housing for me and David Frye, my husband-to-be, and the man sent us to his mother's. And that was where Jim left me to figure out how to be an anthropologist; he waved goodbye and snapped a picture as I entered this stranger's mother's house through the massive wooden doors of the rural Leonese *casa*, carrying my suitcase and stepping gingerly in high-heeled boots around the cow and sheep dung.

For, you see, I had the rare privilege of being a student of Jim's both in the field and in the academy. In fact, it was in the field that I knew him first, because when I began at Princeton, he was on leave in Spain. That first year of graduate school was harrowing for me, as I tried to shed the literary language of subtle insinuation and metaphor I had sought to master as a poet to learn the tough talk of social science, in which, as everyone kept telling me, you had to hit the nail on the head. I got through my first year because Jim popped in briefly from his leave and put in strong words of support on my behalf before his colleagues could terminate my studies. And then, when he returned to campus the following year, I regained hope, taking his course on cosmology and reading intensively with him in what was then the new and emerging literature on the anthropology of Spain and Europe—the anthropology that at the time we thought would bring us “part-way home.” It was a magical moment, being present as Jim's magisterial work of holistic ethnography and inspired memoir, *Bwiti*, took form under our eyes. Watching as our fellow student, the brave Penny Schwartz, assembled the index to this great big book, all of us who worked with Jim were in awe, wondering how we would ever match such an achievement.

As a scholar, Jim attends to the restless movement of the play of tropes. In everyday life, I came to discover, he embodies this very same relentless energy. There were few occasions when we sat and talked in his office. He much preferred to engage in spirited intellectual conversation while sprinting across the street to get grapefruit juice at a grocery store. As for Jim's office at Princeton University, it was equipped with two doors, which allowed him to enter through one in the department and discreetly exit through another that opened onto the parking lot and let him escape without being seen. Jim's disappearing act, worthy of Houdini, was a performative move through space that evoked the wittiness and playfulness of his writing. To me, it showed Jim's admirable talent for cleverly releasing himself from dyspeptic encounters (to use his favorite adjective), whether with overtalkative students or disaffected colleagues, so he could stay focused on the work that really mattered to him.

At a time when there were hardly any Latino or Latina anthropology professors in our universities, it was James Fernandez—the Spoon River Midwesterner with the Latin surname passed down to him from his Asturian grandfather—who made me feel there might be a place for me in anthropology, a discipline that seeks home through the systematic experiencing of homelessness. Although Jim did not claim a Latino identity, he had experienced discrimination in the United States because of his surname and understood the pain of being “racialized.” I remember when he quietly revealed to me that a paper of his, submitted anonymously for review, was turned down when it referenced his own work in the first paragraph. Later, he resubmitted the same paper, excising

the Fernandez reference and substituting instead a reference to a scholar with an Anglo-American name, and it was mysteriously accepted. This was a wrenching moment, which made me aware, early on, of the politics of citation and how racist assumptions underlie the formation of our canons of knowledge, concerns that continue to deeply inform my thinking and writing.

On the more joyful side of things, it was Jim, with what I took to be an Asturian-Latino appreciation for the necessity of fiestas, who invented the idea of the Culture Workshop at Princeton, a space for performances and conviviality (to use Jim's most favorite noun). I was grateful for the Culture Workshop, because it was a space where I was able to legitimately express my own love of images through a photographic ethnography of Santa María del Monte. Now, because graduate students are showing an increasing interest in performance art, video, and installation ethnographies, I believe Jim's idea of the Culture Workshop needs to be revived so we can better learn how to employ the arguments of images that must inform the new anthropologies of our visually saturated age.

Although Jim gave us exemplary models of how to have both integrity and humor in the academy, I always felt that it was in the field, in Spain, where he flourished. He transmitted his passion for fieldwork in the meetings that he would call at his apartment in Cangas de Onis, bringing together Joseba Zulaika, working in the Basque country; John Holmquist, working in Santander; myself and Frye in León; and himself and Renate Lellep Fernandez in Asturias. Over several days we would sit around a dining table in Cangas, looking out over the peaks of Europe and discussing our fieldwork as Jim's endearingly silly-faced beagle—perfectly named Happy—napped at our feet. All of us, in our separate field sites, had been asked by Jim, working in conjunction with the Spanish anthropologist Carmelo Lisón Tolosana, to explore the idea of *la casa*, considering the meaning of home in every sense, from the architectonic, to the familial, to the poetic. Little did I know then, as I examined Leonese ideas of inheritance and roots in the land, how this early project would mark me and set me on the path of understanding the shifting ground of home in the American border spaces and diasporas of Mexico and Cuba.

When I submitted my dissertation about Santa María del Monte, I remember well Jim's disappointment; he had expected I would write an ethnography with a more literary flair, more vivid detail, and more poetic engagement. But his example could not yet embolden me to take daring leaps in my own writing. I felt the weight of the academy and its expectations of what constitutes proper scholarship, and I succumbed, as I now see some of my most creative students succumbing, to the conventional rhetorical forms of social science. The poetry that had submerged when I went into anthropology would not resurface until later, as I began to craft an anthropology that breaks the heart, an anthropology that seeks catharsis, an anthropology that moves those who take part in it. It was then, as I sought to answer for myself why anthropology was still worth doing, that I found in Jim's writing the foundation and inspiration for the kind of ethnographic writing that remembers poetry, that has room for pauses and ways of saying things that have never been said before, that depends on strong images, like "the dark at the bottom of the stairs," to move us into realms of understanding that we did not even know we were in search of.

It is in Cuba, to which I have been returning two or three times a year since 1991, that I am finding, at last, a way to combine my early interest in memories of Africa with my unwavering desire to be connected to the Spanish-speaking world. For me, returning to Cuba and returning to poetry have been synonymous with one another (or in Spanish, "volver a Cuba y volver a la poesía, en mi caso, fueron la misma cosa"). I mean *poetry* here in a very broad sense: I did, literally,

after 17 years of restricting myself to academic prose, start writing poems again when I went back to Cuba, but I returned to poetry in a profounder way, by returning to the argument of images, to the poetry of the imagination and its invocations and evocations.

Cuba is the place that imagined a paradise in the future and enacted a revolution to try to make that future come faster. Yet Cuba is also the place where old things are kept. It is a country in ruins and is often compared to Pompeii. Much of the allure of Cuba and the current boom of everything Cuban in the popular Euro-American imagination has to do with its ruined surfaces. It is a place where things were supposed to cease to matter because socialism would abolish the pettiness of wanting the things of the world. But precisely because things were not supposed to matter anymore, they took on a heightened meaning. When white upper-class and later white middle-class Cubans abandoned the island after the 1959 revolution, they had to part with their things, leaving their houses and apartments, furniture, closets filled with clothes and shoes, porcelain knick-knacks on the windowsill, violet cologne in the bathroom, and their 1950s Buicks and Chevys that famously fill the streets of Cuba today. New things were impossible to come by, so those who stayed inherited the haunting memory of the things left by those who abandoned the island.

I have returned to the apartment my parents rented in Havana, the apartment I am told I lived in as a small child but cannot remember. The family who lives there now, an Afro-Cuban family, conserves the furniture my parents left: the dining room table and chairs, the sofa, the coffee table, the bedroom set with its dresser, down to the rippled bedspread. The woman of the family, showing me around, said, "We've taken good care of everything. It's just the way your parents left it." She acted as if I, who have no memory of those things, were an inspector for history's tribunal.

Our old apartment was to have become the home of Caridad Martínez, or "Caro," as everyone calls her, the Afro-Cuban woman who took care of me and my brother in the years before my parents decided to leave Cuba. My parents had turned over the apartment and all their possessions to Caro. But four months after our departure, the government decided that Caro should not be the beneficiary of the apartment. She refused to leave, claiming her right as a former maid to inherit the apartment of her employers. The authorities chopped the door down with an ax, and she was given minutes to pack her essential belongings and get out.

Caro does not like to speak of the loss of the home that by right of her labor and the redistributive ethics of the revolution should have been hers. Her disillusionment and trauma run deep, and it is only recently that she has been willing to go back with me to the street where she and I once lived. But she refuses to set foot in the building and go upstairs to the top floor, to apartment number 18.

From the apartment, she salvaged something that was not hers but that she deemed worthy of saving: two nightgowns, haunting items of intimate, erotic, and profound feminine longing, as transparent as mantles of nakedness—two honeymoon nightgowns that belonged to my mother and that had been made from the nylon and lace that my grandparents sold in their tiny fabric shop in Old Havana. Two years ago, Caro pulled them out of a double-wrapped plastic bag and said she had been meaning to give them to me for a long time; she said she had hoped to give them to my mother herself, but she no longer believed my mother would return to visit Cuba or that she, Caro, now 72 years old, would ever have a chance to see my mother in New York.

"Here, you take them," she said. "Tell your mother I saved them for her." Why did Caro keep my mother's delicate lingerie during so many tumultuous years of revolution and change? She will not say, so she asks me to imagine instead.

In his introduction of *Persuasions and Performances*, James Fernandez wrote that "anthropology begins with 'revelatory incidents' . . . those especially charged moments in human relationships which are pregnant with meaning" (1986:xi, 214–238). When Caro gave me the nightgowns, I knew my anthropology had begun. I knew I was entering into that realm that Jim has called the "inchoate," a realm whose realness he had to defend on various occasions. Being, as he described himself, "at incipient moments of thought a visualizer rather than a verbalizer," he represented the inchoate as "the dark at the bottom of the stairs." And, he added, "After its being that, whatever that is, it is all the other images and contexts that are swung into association with that central and organizing image to cast light upon it" (1986:215). He concluded that the "images we generate to solve problems are always a function of our primordial experiences" (1986:215).

For me, the inchoate consists of those honeymoon nightgowns, which now hang from plump satin hangers on the door to the room where I write. Both object and metaphor, the nightgowns have obsessed me since Caro put them into my hands. Unlike the dark at the bottom of the stairs, they are palpable things, and yet every bit as elusive. They are relics, ruins, fragments salvaged from the prehistory that is the prerevolutionary Cuban past and my childhood. The nightgowns are silent; they must be made to speak, to tell their story.

I showed one of the nightgowns in public for the first time this term in the early weeks of my undergraduate class "Cuba and Its Diaspora." I trembled as I held it up. I said to the students, "I brought in this nightgown because I want you to understand what *diaspora* means and what an imaginary homeland means; I also want you to understand the kinds of bridges that are possible between women, even when separated by race and class. My mother, a Jewish woman, left Cuba in a hurry. This nightgown stayed behind; but another woman, a black Cuban woman, kept it, saved it for her; another woman who had no need to do so, returned it to her."

From the moment I first began to travel to the island, I knew I was going to Cuba in search of memories because I had none. I left Cuba at too young an age to remember anything—or, more accurately, to remember anything in articulate spoken language. There was memory encoded in the unspeakable—in the panic attacks that plagued me on the first few return trips and in the incredible sense of safety I felt around Caro, in hearing her voice, her laugh. I realized I did not have any memories of my family's life in Cuba, but she did, and those memories were meshed with her own life story. I had no memoir to write about Cuba, but Caro did, and I had to imagine what that memoir would be if she could write it.

And so I embarked on a journey of the imagination, telling the story of my Jewish family in Cuba as seen from Caro's perspective. Caro, I have come to realize, is the witness to our abandoned Jewish existence in Cuba—the memory of our presence there resides with her. Once there were 15,000 Jews on the island; now there are 1,000. I descend from Jews who found a welcome and tolerant home in Cuba—and only because of this did not perish. But sadly the terms of our survival depended on the ugly logic of race and racism. Fearing that the growth of the black population during the final years of slavery and the prominent role played by Afro-Cubans in the wars for independence would lead them to take over the island, the Cuban government encouraged massive immigration of European workers and their families, Jews included. Even Jews like my family, kept out of the United States by anti-Jewish immigration laws early in this

century, were white enough to dilute the so-called black peril and forestall the possibility of Cuba becoming a black nation. And so there is terrible irony but also poetic justice in Caro telling the story of how her consciousness as an Afro-Cuban woman has been marked by Jewish memory.

The fictional Caro I write of, renamed Regla or Yeya, is the anthropologist, observing a Jewish Cuban family based on my own family and trying to understand the beliefs and practices of its members through her vision of the world as an Afro-Cuban woman who grew up in a household in the countryside where Santería was practiced. Regla is struck, for example, by the similarity between the Jewish practice of not consuming the blood of any animal that is slaughtered for human consumption because its blood is its life force and the Santería practice of giving the blood of animal sacrifices to the *orishas* to maintain their vital energy. My efforts to engage imaginatively with this Afro-Cuban religion, which was forged in the fire of slavery and the hope of freedom, draw from my ethnographic fieldwork on Santería practices both in Havana and in the town of Agramonte where my mother's Jewish family settled. The region is known as "little Africa," because of the strong and vital presence of African cultural and religious roots left by the many slaves brought there to work the cane. I am writing a novel that will be an ethnography of the religious imagination, a *Bwiti* of sorts, and I want the material on Santería to be ethnographically accurate, so I present the religion in its fullness and not exoticized or demeaned, as frequently happens in mainstream Cuban American fiction.

Yet another genealogical connection to Jim's work and teaching is that he was a student of William Bascom, the renowned anthropological scholar of Afro-Cuban and African religion. In fact, Jim took a course on Santería with Bascom. My project also connects me to two generations of white intellectual Cuban women, including the ethnographer Lydia Cabrera and the performance artist Ana Mendieta, who came to their interest in Santería through childhood relationships with Afro-Cuban caregivers. In my case, there is the added dimension of Jewishness and the Jewish argument against images and idols, which are condemned vehemently in the Torah, so engaging with Santería and its passionate rituals puts me not only in a position of tremendous contradiction and ambivalence, but also smack in the center of exciting intellectual and poetic possibilities.

In the opening scene of the book, as soon as her Jewish Cuban employers leave, Regla pulls out from under her cot a Santería ritual object, a tureen for the ocean deity of Olokún, that she had kept hidden and proudly puts it in the living room. That is her first act of resistance as an Afro-Cuban woman who will no longer be anyone's maid. But when she is forced out of the apartment, she remembers to take the honeymoon nightgowns for the Jewish Cuban woman who once employed her; for even in the moment of her worst despair, she can feel compassion for what another woman, so unlike her, has lost. Every day I see those nightgowns as I write, and every day I gain strength from the determination with which Caro held on to those gowns as she descended the four flights of stairs from apartment number 18, seeing the dark at the bottom, and yet having faith that she had salvaged for my mother something of transparent beauty, of innocence, from the wreck of oblivion and the home that neither of them would see again.

Reference Cited

Fernandez, James

1986 *Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.