

7. 'Start By Telling Your Own Story': On Becoming An Anthropologist and Performing Anthropology

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'Start from your own story, from your own experience, what brought you here from far away and what you learnt.' Keith Lapulung to the author, Milingimbi 1999.

'Life as the product of life. However far man may extend himself with his knowledge, however objective he may appear to himself — ultimately he reaps nothing but his own biography.' Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, Section IX, 'Man Alone with Himself', aphorism 513.

Introduction

Since the beginning of my career as an anthropology undergraduate in the mid-80s, and then as a PhD student in the early 90s at the London School of Economics, I have been aware of the issues raised by the so-called reflexive turn in the discipline. I was, in fact, particularly affected by the methodological and ethical concerns of what is known as 'cultural critique' or more generally the 'politics of representation': dismantling the power of the interpreter, the strategies of othering, as well as debunking the pitfalls of essentialism, the illusion of objective truth, and the partiality of ethnography (Clifford 1988; Fabian 1983; Marcus & Fisher 1987; Rosaldo 1989; Torgonvick 1991). I was equally exposed to some of the proposed solutions to these questions, such as the shift to embodied experience, and intersubjectivity in everyday life and in fieldwork research (Jackson 1983, 1989, 1998; Stoller 1989). My past interest and ongoing commitment to these issues in my current practice as a fieldworker, author, and lecturer also stem from personal, as well as professional motivations, choices, experiences and encounters which have brought me to anthropology.

I am reminded of the words that my Yolngu friend, Keith Lapulung, told me a few years ago, on the occasion of one of my return visits to Milingimbi, the Indigenous community in Northeast Arnhem Land where I have been conducting most of my fieldwork research since 1990. In one of our long conversations, I asked him to advise me on what aspects of my research I should write a book. Without hesitation, he told me not only to focus on what I learnt over the years

in Milingimbi but also to ‘start from your own story, from your own experience, what brought you here from far away’. This perspective would not only start including others as our public, as Lapulung’s suggestion might have implied, but could also offer us other means to shift from what has been termed knowledge *about* to knowledge *with* the other (Jackson 1989, p. 8; von Sturmer 1999, 2001). In anthropology, knowledge *about* the other requires detachment or distance, objectivity, pre-established criteria and theoretical frameworks according to which ideas, objects and people are arrayed; in other words, it is conceived as separate from the sociality and intimacy in which it is embedded. In contrast, knowledge *with* is the more intuitive, face to face, coeval (Fabian 1983, p. 156), immediate and personal ways of knowing others in the field that cannot be reduced to the impersonal reality in the languages of theoretical reflexions and generalisations (De Monticelli 1998, p. 88; Jackson 1996, p. 8). Knowledge *with* is a ‘being alongside with’ that strengthens as well as makes one vulnerable (von Sturmer 2001, p. 104; De Monticelli 1998, pp. 181–182; Jackson 1989, p. 1; Tamisari 2006). In other words, encounters should be conceived in terms of the reality of a person in her own singularity, diversity, originality, creativity and unpredictability: an individuality ‘incarnated in the lived actualisation of one’s feelings—and in the passions, decisions and actions that follow’ (De Monticelli 2003, p. 168).

With his clear and compelling words, Lapulung expressed one of the premises of a ‘new ethnology’, as identified by Ernesto De Martino (De Martino 2002, p. 86), an Italian ethnologist who, since the 1950s, incisively questioned the epistemological basis of positivist anthropological representations, including the ethnographer’s positioning.¹ Criticising ahistorical approaches and ‘objectivity’ in anthropological descriptive accounts, as early as 1961, De Martino states that it is necessary to reveal the genesis of one’s own research and/or ‘consider the problem’ of the authors’ cultural history in order to acknowledge the other. In proposing a ‘new anthropology’, Fabian makes a similar point. In contrast to an ‘informing ethnography’ conceived of as a process of collection, selection and classification of data mainly through verbal communication, he advances the notion of a ‘performing ethnography’ (Fabian 1990, p. xv). In order to challenge ‘the power of the hermeneut, the authoritative interpreter of texts’, he affirms that ‘ethnographies are questionable representations unless they show their own genesis’, and ethnographers should recognise that any social phenomenon under scrutiny ‘is not principally what they perform and we observe’, but a reality in which we are engaged (Fabian 1990, p.p xiv–xv). These are the same

1 Ernesto De Martino is almost unknown in English-speaking anthropological traditions. His first monograph, *The Land of Remorse: A study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, was translated into English by D.L. Zinn in 2005. The book was first published in Italian in 1961 as *La Terra del Rimorso: Contributo a una storia religiosa del Sud*. On the ‘promises and threats of anthropology’, see also (De Martino 2002, pp. 84–118; De Martino 1977, pp. 389–423).

questions at the basis of Pierre Nora's project for a 'new history' that would break with a long scientific tradition which forced historians to 'disguise their personality behind their knowledge ... and express themselves only through others' (Nora 1987, p. 5).

Nora's project, Fabian's performing ethnography, Lapulung's advice, and especially De Martino's warning, say the same thing in different yet complementary ways: if we deny ourselves we deny the other, if we do not start from our own story, we debase that of the other, if we do not start by unveiling the genesis of our own research as well as the passions and motivations informing and sustaining it, we will diminish the passion and the individuality of the other. The problem is not only due to having taken the other's individuality for granted—a shortcoming that has been recognised and partially addressed—but also to having systematically hidden the ethnographer's 'personal reality' (De Monticelli 1998, p. 98) and 'cultural history' (De Martino 2002, p. 1) that, with the individuality of the other, equally constitutes the grounds of any engagement. As 'the miniaturists of the social sciences' (Geertz 1971, p. 4), anthropologists should not only put others' 'individual lives under the microscope as a route to elucidating the nature of human social life' (Rapport 2003, p. 6), but also trace their own personal and intellectual trajectories by telling their stories. With some exceptions, as Popkin notes for historians (Popkin 1999, p. 727), anthropologists have been reluctant to engage in autoethnography (see Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011) mainly because exposing their personal selves 'could undermine the authority of their scholarship'. As De Martino insists, scholars should not hide their own passions and choices but assert them without being afraid of becoming unfaithful to truth: 'On the contrary this attitude [could] open up the research to a new dimension of fidelity to the real' (De Martino 2002, p. 92).

Either-Or: From Philosophy to Anthropology via a Tearoom

For me, anthropology has brought together four great passions: my political commitment, my fascination for philosophy, the real pleasure of learning foreign languages, and my intense life-long love for dancing. I was born in Genoa but, at the age of 12, moved with my family to Venice, where my father had found a job as a shipping clerk in a government-owned company. At the beginning, I took the move to Venice very badly but I soon grew to love my new city, as it offered me an independence and autonomy that would have been impossible in other places. Now that I have returned to live in Venice, I like to think I am a Venetian by adoption, as I spent here the most forming years of my adolescence.

From my first year at high school I was fascinated by philosophy, thanks to the teaching of Professor Aldo Cardin, who was able to capture our restless attention by presenting us key topics in an accessible yet sophisticated and rigorous way. One of the philosophers I was introduced to was Søren Kierkegaard. His book, *Either-Or: A fragment of life*, had a deep influence on me, although I read this text in an idiosyncratic manner, picking and focusing on the specific concepts and ideas that most resonated with the impetuous and impatient adolescent I was. I completely identified with the dilemma of choosing, as I was anxiously looking for ways of asserting and shaping my personality and future. What struck me in this work and has remained with me since was the way in which the ‘reality of choosing’ (Kierkegaard 1976, p. 52) was not determined by the ‘rightness’ of the choice, but was defined by the passion of the act of choosing itself. Picking up the very copy of this book I read so eagerly, I have found what I had underlined when I was around 16:

... I can say that in choosing it is not important to choose right but rather the energy, seriousness and pathos with which one chooses (Kierkegaard 1976, p. 43, my translation).

From the very beginning of high school, I started gravitating around the student movement that was very active in those years. In fact, my political commitment started in my first year in high school, on the 11th of September, 1973, the day in which President Salvador Allende, we claimed, was assassinated, and did not commit suicide.² I joined the other students walking out of the school to participate in an almost spontaneous demonstration of indignation and protest without any doubt.

My political commitment was also influenced and informed, at least at the beginning, by the political education I received from my father at home. A supporter of the Italian Communist Party, my father often lectured us on social justice, workers’ rights and especially his firm opposition to the Catholic Church’s meddling in State affairs. Almost every Sunday, my father used to initiate a heated discussion on current political debates with his own father, who was a republican, and his father-in-law, who had remained a convinced fascist and member of the Italian Social Movement Party (MSI). Although my mother asked us to leave the table as soon as the fierce altercations would start, I could hear my father screaming and swearing at the top of his voice until the front door would slam shut behind the theatrical exit of one of my two grandfathers.

I remember a particular speech my father made to me when I was around ten, in a moment that I could only properly contextualise later. It must have been

² Despite the fact that President Salvador Allende’s suicide was confirmed by the Chilean Government following the exhumation of his body in 2011, there are still speculations that he was assassinated in the aftermath of Pinochet’s coup d’état.

just after the unrests of 1968 when he summoned me, and, in a solemn and concerned tone of voice, warned that I should value events 'always thinking with my own mind'. To be able to do that, he added, I had 'to read a lot and go on studying'. I followed closely all the modest yet highly-principled battles he waged with the unions against his employer in order to have some of his rights recognised. During high school, however, I started arguing with my father over a series of issues, mainly due to my sympathies for extra-parliamentary political movements and particularly my assiduous participation in a local feminist group. Despite his communist ideals, my father, like most men of his generation, was steeped in, and kept on reproducing sexist and racist attitudes towards everything different or new. For instance, he was in favour of divorce—legalised in Italy with the referendum of 1974—but opposed the legalisation of abortion that was passed after the referendum of 1978. My thirst for independence and the escalating tension and frequent arguments with my father led me to leave home and move into a small shared flat in Venice as soon as I turned 18.

At the end of high school, I started a degree in philosophy at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, which I did not complete. It was then the end of the 70s, a period of social political turmoil also known as *gli anni di piombo*, literally 'the years of lead', in reference to the number of lead bullets shot in both right-wing and left-wing terrorist attacks. State control increased through the enforcing of a series of anti-terrorist laws after the Red Brigades kidnapped and assassinated Aldo Moro, then President of the Christian Democratic Party, in 1978.

My involvement in the student movement, especially a local feminist group, distanced me from university and the way in which philosophy was taught at the time. Despite my passion for the discipline, philosophy was taught, as Bourdieu puts it in his 'self-analysis', in a 'closed, separate world, set apart from the vicissitudes of the real world' (Bourdieu 2007, pp. 8–9), and it seemed to me, as Lévi-Strauss notes, 'a kind of aesthetic contemplation of consciousness by itself' (Lévi-Strauss 1989, p. 63). I kept on studying philosophy outside the university, but opted for Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1976), which I read avidly in 1979. At the same time, I continued to read Sartre's novels, which affected me deeply. I particularly recall *Nausea* and *Dirty Hands*, as the latter dealt with political engagement. However, my total energies were completely absorbed by the ideas, initiatives and events aimed at claiming justice, democracy and freedom. Looking for an activity that could allow the enactment of this real effervescence towards political change, in 1979 I left university and, with four other 18-year-old women, I opened a tearoom called *La Zucca* (The Pumpkin). This name was decided upon in reference to the feminist re-readings of the Cinderella tale, to stress the capacity for political transformation leading to women's emancipation.

Following the model of similar initiatives in Florence and Bologna, the tearoom was not only a commercial activity but represented the possibility of creating a meeting point or, better, a sort of refuge from the oppressing policing enforced by the State in those years. We saw the tearoom as an alternative place where we could discuss politics, read poetry or simply gather in a free and creative space. After a few months, however, the tearoom went bankrupt for a number of reasons: many of our prospective clients were, in fact, only interested in boozing; in addition, most of the shopkeepers around, mainly men, derided us for our inexperience and ingenuousness; finally, a group of drug addicts who lived in the neighbourhood started being aggressive. Soon I realised that our initiative was completely foreign to the cultural and social reality in which it was set, or, as I would have said in those days, 'the tearoom was bourgeois', as it went against the cultural grain of everyday life in Venice. Those who knew Venice back then, when the local taverns (*bacari*) were the privileged gathering places for bean soup-eating, card-playing and soccer-talking workers, will certainly smile at the notion of a place where only tea and cakes were served.

I decided to go back to studying. Perhaps, I thought, this was the only thing I could do properly. I chose to dedicate myself to the study of languages, English and French, a practical study that could keep me in touch with people and life. In 1980, I enrolled in a private interpreting school in Florence where I lived for three years. During this period, I travelled and lived for long periods in France and England in order to become proficient in the languages I was studying. Perhaps, without knowing it, my anthropological career started from my travel experiences in these countries, when I realised that the only way of learning a language was with others, mainly in the streets. I used to spend many hours listening to the different ways and accents in which people spoke English around me, trying to understand what was happening and attempting to participate. I finally felt at ease when I could effortlessly reply to a young woman who had asked me for directions with a thick London accent.

As soon as I established myself as a freelance translator and interpreter in London, however, I started feeling unsatisfied, as I was missing the intellectual stimulus and the rigorous critique I had known when studying philosophy. With the exception of some interesting jobs (interpreting at the international meetings of the World Council of Churches, and in some court cases, for example) most of my work dealt with boring translations of technical instruction manuals which, once again, made me feel isolated from the people and life around me.

In 1986, looking at university curricula, I came across social anthropology, a subject I had never heard of before. In my ignorance, I believed that anthropology united the study of the philosophy of non-western societies and the study of a language necessary to understand and document their knowledge system, values, symbols and practices. In addition, from my quixotic perspective, it

offered the potential of dealing with, or, at least, learning and denouncing the consequences of what, at the time, I termed as the imperialist domination and destructive capitalist influence of the 'West over the rest'. Thanks to a scholarship, I enrolled as an undergraduate student in the Social Anthropology Department at the London School of Economics (LSE) in 1986.

At LSE my studies were guided by a group of academics who stimulated my intellectual curiosity and developed my research potential in different ways.³ However, in hindsight, I am grateful to my teachers not only for their intellectual rigour, but also for the contagious enthusiasm for critical thinking that they transmitted in their teaching. Paradoxically, it was this very passion they passed on that motivated and sustained me especially when I made important choices in my student career so openly against their judgment and advice.

Sticking To My Decision: Doing Fieldwork on Dance

In my third year as an undergraduate, I took a course taught by David McKnight, who had conducted his fieldwork among the Lardil in the Gulf of Carpentaria in Australia. McKnight's introduction to his course struck a chord with me. In a few broad and dismissive sentences that sounded like a challenge, he said something like: 'I'm going to teach a course on my own research on ritual and dance and I only want students who are interested'. His lectures inspired me not only for their informality but also because, for the first time, I could start appreciating that anthropology is a modality of knowledge based on first-hand experience and encountering people. More significantly, McKnight's lectures awoke another of my passions that had remained dormant up to then: dance. From a very young age I loved dancing and over the years I practiced a varieties of styles: rhythmic, classical, and modern dance. I have always danced and I could not live without practicing some form of dancing. My latest discovery is Argentine tango, which I've been assiduously practicing for the last nine years.

In talking about Lardil ceremonies, McKnight insisted that dance in ritual contexts is an 'intellectual activity', and, in order to capture what perhaps could not be said in words, would turn on the music and start dancing. He would explain to us the meanings of dance steps and gestures. Most importantly, through his impromptu and energetic executions, he enacted the intensity or 'feeling' of movement as a way of engaging attention. This expressive aspect and sensual understanding of dance performance—what is immediately

³ I would like to acknowledge the following lecturers in particular: Maurice Bloch, Chris Fuller, Alfred Gell, David McKnight, Joanna Overing, Jonathan Parry, Michael Sallnow and James Woodburn.

experienced yet escapes analysis (Dufrenne 1973, p. 263)—was to be a central concern in my research (Tamisari 2000, 2005a, 2005b, 2014). Thanks to my dance practice, those unusual lectures on Lardil dance made me understand—on a pre-objective, experiential level—that the ‘how’ adds meaning to the ‘what’ of performance, or, in other words, expression overflows and gives life to representation (Tamisari 2005a, p. 194; see also Schieffelin 1985). What resonated with me in those lectures was that, as I argued much later, ‘feeling [is] a mode of attention [that] revives knowledge and it is knowledge which makes this feeling intelligent’ (Tamisari 2005b, p. 54). From that time, I started reading whatever I could find on Australian Indigenous studies in general and dance in particular. The dearth of material then available in London further increased my intellectual curiosity.

My proposal to focus on ceremonial dance and carry out fieldwork in Australia did not, however, meet my other lecturers’ wishes. The head of department was opposed to my choice. He said that Aboriginal people were ‘dead’, as they had been completely assimilated by the colonial regime, and dismissively added that studying dance in this context would be equivalent to studying embroidery in the Catholic Church. Another of my lecturers who had exercised a strong influence during my undergraduate years discouraged me from carrying out research in Australia, saying ‘I wouldn’t be seen dead there’. This time, however, I was not prepared to give up, and, defying my teachers, I stuck to my decision.

The difficulties I encountered did not end with my return from the field, when, like other PhD students, I was to present my research results. Around 1992 at LSE, most lecturers were not attuned to ethical concerns in general, and were oblivious of the particular processes of recognition and protocol that research in Indigenous studies could not avoid considering. In what follows, I would like to recall a series of events that informed my approach and practice in teaching Indigenous studies. As Fabian notes, the notion of performance does not only refer to what, beyond discourse, can be ‘made present only through action [and] enactment’ in which the ethnographer is engaged, but also implies the ‘communication of our finding, mostly through writing’, and, I would add, teaching (Fabian 1990, p. 6). During my fieldwork I was not only taught many aspects of Yolngu knowledge but was also educated to become and be accountable for the knowledge I had learnt. In other words, I was given and expected to take up the responsibility of performing that knowledge according to Yolngu Law (*rom*) both in the community and elsewhere (Tamisari 2005b).

The Responsibility of Performance

As soon as I arrived in Milinbimbi in 1990, I realised that I had been naïve and rather arrogant in wanting to study Yolngu ritual in general, and dance in particular, in isolation from the complexities of a highly sophisticated political system expressed in a religious and aesthetic idiom, and as such, a highly sensitive sphere of power and authority negotiations in gender, generational and cross-cultural interactions. Very soon I recognised that, in order to approach the significance of Yolngu ritual dance, I had to learn the language, transcribe the songs, understand the principles and dynamics of the land tenure organisation, and orient myself in the intricate network of rights and duties in everyday life and ceremonial performance. Ceremony is not simply a specific context, but rather provides a frame and logic of Yolngu Law (see Christie 1992, p. 12; Tamisari & Milmilany 2003, p. 6), namely the correct social and moral behaviour to establish, reproduce and sustain relationships with others, both human and ancestral, animate and inanimate (Tamisari & Bradley 2005). Most importantly, as I was gradually taught in subtle yet consistent ways, the law is also a modality of knowledge, which, always actualised through consenting and dissenting with another person or 'quasi-person' in specific encounters (De Monticelli 2003, p. 168), needs to be experienced and felt in order to be observed and applied (Tamisari 2006, 2014).

When, on my return from the my first period of fieldwork (1990–1992), I was asked to report on my research results, I strongly felt that there was some information that I could not mention—in this case a series of proper individual and group names. At the time, fresh from the field, I had not as yet elaborated the cultural and political significance of proper names (Tamisari 2002), but I knew that I could not present that information. The lecturer who was organising the seminars criticised me, saying that these concerns were not relevant and that I should relate all the data I collected without hesitation 'in the name of science'. Although at the time I could not fully articulate the reasons behind my ethical position, I replied that in pronouncing those proper names I would have betrayed the people who entrusted me with that knowledge. With the wisdom of hindsight, this was the first occasion in which I realised that, along with the knowledge, I was also given the responsibility to handle it without contravening Yolngu rules and sensibilities.

On several occasions during my fieldwork I had received direct instructions on what I should not document and reproduce in any form because of its sacred/secret nature. More informally, I understood what constitutes intimate and personal knowledge that cannot be divulged. However, it was only at the end of my first stay in Milingimbi that I officially received precise instructions on how to handle the knowledge I had acquired. A few days before my departure from

the field and return to London in 1992, I was summoned by Charles Manydjari, my 'mother's brother' (*ngapipi*) and Liwagawumirr elder who presented me with a precious gift after a short but intense dance organised for the occasion. The feather crownlet I was given is one of the sacred objects embodying the ancestral knowledge and land ownership of his group.

At the end of the dance, sitting next to him with the crownlet firmly around my head, Ngapipi said to me: 'This is your mother, it is private, and it is for you to take away. I give it to you to take to London where you should not forget that you can always put your Yolngu cap on. However, you should only wear it on important occasions.'

The meaning of this event, which I recall in detail elsewhere (Tamisari 2005b), was a way of consolidating the passion of our relationship (Sansom 1995, p. 308), acknowledging my stay in the community, marking my departure, and a manner of stressing our 'mutuality of being' (Stasch 2009, p. 132; see also Sahlins 2011) which bonded us and all other living and deceased kin of my adoptive family. The dance and the gift I received also marked the beginning of a new relationship, a welcome rather than a farewell. Only now, however, almost 20 years from that day and after many returns, can I begin to appreciate the meaning of this gift in terms of the ongoing fulfilment of the responsibilities that such a mutual engagement engenders. Ngapipi stated that the gift I received was the potential—in its meaning of having the power and authority—'to put my Yolngu cap on', but I did not fully understand it at the time. As Ngapipi instructed me, I took the feather circlet with me to London where I returned to write up my PhD thesis. The first opportunity to wear it presented itself at my viva, which took place at the London School of Economics in 1994. At the end of the viva, I took the circlet out of my bag and posed for a photograph tall and proud with it firmly on my head standing between my two examiners, Professors Howard Morphy and Bruce Kapferer. The second opportunity was in 1999, when I received Australian citizenship at the Leichhardt Town Hall in Sydney. I donned the crownlet during the ceremony. In displaying this object on important occasions, as instructed by Ngapipi, I continued to learn about the significance of the performative from a Yolngu perspective. At the time, I thought that these occasions warranted the display of this object because the circlet would be the Yolngu equivalent of a PhD award and citizenship certificate. I now understand that the significance of this gift does not only reside in the object as a token of my membership in Yolngu society, nor is it merely the equivalent of a degree in Yolngu knowledge. The significance of this gift resides in the responsibility of performance, the possibility I was given to display it, and the rights and duties I was granted in handling Yolngu knowledge. Every time I look at the crownlet, which I jealously keep in my bedroom, I remember and understand what Charles Manydjari told me when he bestowed it upon me.

The crownlet is not simply an object to be worn at important occasions but, most importantly, stands for a way of thinking, a mode of knowing and doing I was taught and asked to employ whenever I dealt with and presented Yolngu knowledge in my performances as a writer and a teacher.

Teaching Indigenous Studies

When I arrived in Sydney to take up my first lecturing appointment, I was disoriented. It was the first time that I lived in an Australian city, having spent most of the previous two and a half years in the Indigenous community of Milingimbi. I planned, wrote and delivered several courses, including the large introductory class in Indigenous studies that I co-taught with Gillian Cowlshaw. I will never forget the first lecture I gave in this course, entitled 'Aborigines in Australia'. Despite my scrupulous preparation, my heart throbbed in my throat and I was almost paralysed in front of hundreds of students who were eagerly looking at me in anticipation. Today I can say that what made me so insecure was not so much my inexperience in addressing a large student audience for the first time, but the responsibility of performance that my teaching involved. From this moment, I became aware that, as Charles Manydjari told me, teaching was one of the occasions where I had to test and find out what 'to put my Yolngu cap on' meant, not only in terms of the trust I was given in handling Yolngu knowledge, but also in dealing with Indigenous realities, with all their ethical risks and possibilities. One of the major issues I have had to confront throughout my teaching in Australia, as well as now in Italy, was students' stereotypical representations of Indigenous realities: a superficial knowledge of Australian colonial past and an almost total ignorance of the history and extent of the country's racial conflict. After the first lectures on aspects of this history, some students accused me of not telling the truth, while others were sincerely shocked and asked me, as in Reynolds' book title 'why weren't we told?' (Reynolds' 1999). Although many studies on this hidden history had been published and political events had been drastically changing the political scene throughout the 90s, it seemed to me that 'the Great Australian Silence' (Stanner 1979, p. 207) was still carrying on in subtle yet powerful ways. Given the complicity of anthropology in reproducing and transforming 'the Great Australian Silence' into 'a cult of forgetfulness' of past and present racial relations (Stanner 1979, p. 214), it was, for me, a priority to make students critically reflect on these historical and cultural representations by focusing on what I referred to as 'the politics of representation' (Langton 1983, 2003, pp. 109ff). It is from this perspective that I enthusiastically collaborated with the colleagues of the Koori

Centre at the University of Sydney who were struggling to gain control over the teaching of the courses in Indigenous Studies in order to develop the Centre, which had been established in 1992 (Mooney & Cleverly 2011).⁴

In 2001 at the University of Queensland I found myself again co-teaching the introductory course in Indigenous studies ('Aboriginal and Islander Australia', which was renamed 'Contested Realities' in 2003) this time in collaboration with John Bradley, with whom I shared my concerns.

Thanks to the discussions I had with John throughout these years of close collaboration, I could start identifying and fully elaborating the ways in which our personal encounters with specific persons in the field are at the basis of the knowledge we produce in our performances as teachers and authors. It was from this time that I began courses by 'telling my story', thus expanding the notion of the ethnographer's 'positioning' to include my motivations, choices, experience and passions inevitably stemming from specific encounters with other persons through the gradual and never-ending process of personal acquaintance (Tamisari 2006).

In the field, we neither meet a culture as system of values and ideas, nor do we meet a(ny)body with its biological functions and rhythms. In the field we do not happen to come across a 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1972, p. 72), but a person with her essential individuality 'which is the story of a person, one's experiences, one's formation, encounters, choices, adventures and misadventures' (De Monticelli 1998, p. 121). If it is impossible to conceive a world without this sense of personal reality (De Monticelli, p. 98), I would argue that it is possible to encounter another person only by exposing one's own essential individuality. Thus, in order to encounter other person—in the field, in a classroom or in writing—it is not sufficient to focus on the other's essential individuality without also including our own as ethnographers, teachers and authors. Elaborating on De Monticelli, I maintain that the encounter is not only the experience in which an essential individuality announces itself to us, but also the manner in which we are prepared to announce ourselves to them, or the willingness of disclosing our personal and cultural history (De Monticelli 1998, p. 134). 'Starting by my own story'—what brought me to become an anthropologist as well the passions behind my choices and motivations—has allowed me to fulfil the responsibility implicit in the trust and accountability that a mutual engagement with other persons engenders. Continuously challenged by my performance as a writer and a teacher, I keep exposing myself to all the risks of relationships in order to renew the full potential of encountering the other.

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