



Anthropology that warms your heart: on being a bride in the field

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This paper reflects upon the difficult entanglement of personal and professional identities that I experienced when getting married during doctoral fieldwork. In addition to producing insights for my ethnographic data, the process of marrying, and the planning of a wedding, transformed my understanding of my relationship to informants, requiring me to re-examine my previously unconscious distance between my 'fieldwork life' and my 'real life'. Falling in love in the field, under the watchful gaze of informants and beyond the gaze of home, obliged me to challenge distinctions I had unintentionally made between an intellectual, anthropological involvement with Cuban culture, and an emotional, aesthetic and personal distance from Cuban culture. At the same time, I concluded that such artificial distinctions between 'field' and 'life' were in themselves necessary and productive strategies to manage the emotional challenges of extended fieldwork.

Introduction

It often seems that significant moments in anthropological fieldwork are relegated to the margins of the eventual texts in which ethnographies appear. In prefaces, epilogues and acknowledgments pages, friendships are made, grants are awarded, and babies are born—all of which for many anthropologists were perhaps as crucial in enabling an ethnography to take the direction that it did as any theoretical disposition or discovery. In my own case of doing doctoral fieldwork in Cuba, one such significant moment was to fall in love, and later on to marry, in the city (although not the specific community) where my research was based. By the time of my wedding, my research interests had already largely been formed. However, the process of planning and appearing in a wedding, and the emotions I experienced in shifting between my identity as an anthropologist with a network of 'informants' and 'colleagues' and my identity as a bride with a newly acquired 'family', prompted some important reflections around my own position as a fieldworker. Although I found some of these reflections acutely uncomfortable, they were ultimately extremely productive in shaping the formal content of my doctoral research, and added new levels of understanding to decisions I made about theory, literature, methodology and the personal politics of doing anthropological research.

In an attempt to mirror the complicated tangles of personal emotions, domestic arrangements and research questions that were the reality of my fieldwork experience, this paper combines some discussion of my doctoral research with an exploration of the personal emotions and events that surrounded my wedding. Although my ideas and experiences have been informed by broader debates in anthropology and by the particular contributions of some well-known scholars who have also worked in Cuba, my intention

here is not to produce a traditional academic anthropological text. With something of an inversion of the academic tradition of prefacing the research with mere personal stories, here the mere details of my doctoral research are largely included to enhance the central focus of the paper: my personal experience in grappling with the emotions and problems associated with combining my first large-scale anthropological work with such a significant personal event as a wedding.

In taking this approach, I am not suggesting that more standard conventions in anthropological research should be abandoned; I personally would be wary of (and probably bored by) anthropological work if it became entirely consumed by autobiography (Okeley 1992:2-3). Although some of the most widely read contributions to anthropological literature in recent decades have exhorted scholars to become more reflexive and transparent in their representation of themselves and others, such calls to action have been most successfully launched by senior anthropologists whose competence in the most basic aspects of ethnographic research are not up for examination (see for example Clifford 1986:1-26, Rosaldo 1989:1-21). Because I did not want my formal doctoral research to become 'all about me', and in order to protect my somewhat vulnerable personal emotions and relationships from the rigours of academic examination, the story of my wedding and its relevance to my research was largely left out of my PhD thesis. In this context, writing this paper became an opportunity to discuss some of the most significant things that I was unwilling or unable to explore within the more rigid conventions of academic analysis.

Other anthropologists who have recently conducted work in Cuba have also worked hard to find quite different ways of writing their emotional involvement with the fieldsite into their research. Although the challenges of navigating the connections and disjunctures between fieldwork and personal life have been explored across many different cultural contexts (cf. Markowitz and Ashkenazi 1999, Okeley 1992), I am by no means the first person doing fieldwork in Cuba who has been compelled to address their own difficult emotional and moral encounters with, and in, the field. Some of the reasons for this compulsion will become clearer in subsequent sections of this paper, as the politico-economic realities of Cuban life in the post-Soviet era have created particularly fraught emotional and political divides, both within Cuban communities and between Cubans and foreigners. In such a context, even the most emotionally distant of researchers would struggle to maintain divisions between their research projects and their personal relationships—and for most anthropologists, the informality and longevity of ethnographic fieldwork tends to work against the viability of maintaining such divisions in the first place.

Ruth Behar's (1997) writing is perhaps the best-known discussion of the intersection of personal and professional experiences with reference to Cuba. Her collection *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* is fundamentally concerned with the connections between her work as an anthropologist and her emotional and familial connections to Cuba. However, Behar's understanding of Cuba is strikingly different from my own: for her, Cuba is more of an absence than a presence, writing as she does about her experiences of emigration from Cuba and growing up in the United States as a Cuban Jew. Upon return to Cuba as an adult anthropologist, Behar despairs at the notion of turning her country of birth into 'just another anthropological fieldsite'

(1997:24), yet it seems that Behar's relationship to Cuba, which is marked by the powerful emotions of grief and longing, informs much of her anthropological work undertaken in fieldsites in Spain and Mexico as well. Places beyond Cuba have therefore also become spaces for Behar to explore her own Cuban identity. Behar's accounts of visiting Cuba evoke a particularly Cuban-American experience of the island as defined by the trauma of departure and the bitterness that surrounds Cuban-American relations between individuals as much as between governments (ibid:136-156). It seems to me that this experience of Cuba is at the heart of what Behar sees as the definitive task of the anthropologist: to be a 'vulnerable observer' who cannot merely observe terror, trauma and distress, but who becomes deeply emotionally enmeshed in the field. Behar recognises that her own identity, deeply marked by the negative emotions that are so strongly associated with having left Cuba, has directly informed such research themes as grief, memories of the past, and the difficult crossings of borders.

My own emotional encounters have been very different. My Australian upbringing places me largely outside the sphere of Cuban-American politics, and my Filipina heritage allowed for some interesting connections and comparisons with informants and local scholars. My own approach to Cuba, including most importantly my experience of marrying a Cuban resident, leads me to believe that Behar's analysis can be extended and adapted in at least two significant ways. Firstly, not only the traumatic emotions of loss and grief, but also such typically joyful experiences as love and celebration can inspire meaningful reflection on the goals and processes of anthropology. However, as shall be shown in my own wedding story, such moments of joy and celebration can also involve challenging and distressing realisations and negotiations. Secondly, as I shall argue briefly in the conclusion to this paper, although Behar and other anthropologists conclude that recognising the continuities between our personal experiences and our professional research is ethically and theoretically enriching, I still found it necessary as an anthropologist to employ distancing techniques that artificially separated my 'personal life' from my 'field life' in order to successfully undertake my research and manage my emotional wellbeing. Although I went into the field equipped to deal with many of the ethical, political, theoretical and methodological challenges that I would encounter as an anthropologist, I was nevertheless forced to confront many unexpected emotions as a result of my personal relationships in the field.

The research

Soon after beginning my fieldwork in Santiago, Cuba's second biggest city, I was distracted from my original intention of studying the material culture and consumption of media technologies, as I realised that other forms of consumption were for many Cubans the focus of a much more intensive energy and scrutiny. Gradually my research topic grew to consider broader examples of domestic consumption—although I retained my study of media as a subsection of the project—as I decided to analyse the impact of post-Soviet reforms in Cuba on the banal domestic practices of the residents of Santiago. For over 15 years, although Cuba has retained an ideological commitment to socialism, state policy has also enabled the introduction of foreign investment, tourism, remittances and forms of small business, to offset the critical loss of finance and support that the country suffered with the decline of socialist Europe (Eckstein 2003:88-126). For much of this

time, a dual economy has operated, whereby some staple commodities remain available through socialist distribution networks such as rationing, whilst other commodities can only be found at first-world prices in dollar shops known as *chopin*, a Cubanisation of 'shopping'. The informal economy, much of which operates illegally, grew from being a supplementary source of goods to becoming of primary importance for many households in acquiring such basic consumer goods as food and cleaning products (Pérez-López 1995). For many Cubans who had experienced several decades of relative prosperity under Soviet socialism, the unforeseen and extremely rapid decline into near starvation that occurred in the mid-1990s came as a tremendous shock. The sphere in which this decline was most acutely felt was in the near total disappearance of many basic and luxury consumer goods. Of the many transformations that occurred during the emergence of this new political phase, optimistically named the 'Special Period', the change most recounted and most resented has been the scarcity of consumer goods and the dramatic increase in prices when such goods are available (Pertierra 2006).

By the time of my fieldwork in 2003-04, many aspects of the economy had recovered considerably. However, goods shortages and the difficulties of a dual economy, wherein many Cubans earn salaries in Cuban pesos but were forced to buy essential items in US dollars, remained a source of constant concern and struggle. I decided to focus my research on the most common aspects of women's struggle to consume, by examining the mundane tasks and strategies that enabled women to consume basic and luxury goods to feed their families and manage their homes. It seemed to me that an essential characteristic of what life in post-Soviet Cuba was like could be captured in studying those activities that are most banal and that occupy the most time. As women, especially women with children or grandchildren, are typically responsible for managing domestic consumption (Holgado Fernández 2000, Pearson 1997), the tasks that most occupy their time and mental energy are those of acquiring sufficient and consistent quantities of certain types of consumer goods; usually groceries, cleaning products, household items, appliances and clothing.

Far from being a pleasurable leisure activity, shopping was a difficult battle against the odds for these women; they had to overcome queues, shortages, high prices, unpredictable domestic economies, legal barriers, and community scrutiny. As I discuss at length in my PhD thesis, the importance of invoking informal networks and informal economies as strategies to overcome scarcity, high prices and legislative restrictions in Cuba bears many similarities to socialist and postsocialist experiences of consumption found elsewhere (for examples of such research, see Berdahl 1999, Humphrey 1995, Ledeneva 1998, Sampson 1987). Daily conversations inevitably focussed on what was (or more usually, was not) in the shops, on how many rations had arrived, or on how hard it had been to acquire a much-wanted item. For many Cubans, their national and personal identity was deeply embedded in their *frustrated* consumption; although not many Cubans particularly desired capitalism, many of them wanted goods, and the relative absence of such goods seemed to create a profound sense of dissatisfaction (Pertierra 2006). Thus, even joyous special occasions, such as Carnival, birthdays and—of course—weddings, seemed to take on a slightly melancholic quality as the event was largely measured by the sacrifice, effort and inventiveness required to assemble the appropriate material resources.

The love story

Not long into my stay in Santiago, through friends and family of my tutor at the local University, I met Karel. As, over time, we progressed from dating, to love, to engagement, our entire relationship unfolded under the attentive gaze of colleagues, friends, neighbours and informants. Although my husband is not from the area of the city in which my research was based, as time went on, he came to meet almost all of my informants. His participation in my fieldwork included a range of tasks appropriate to an attentive and at times protective partner; sometimes walking with me to visit informants, impatiently holding the video camera through long interviews, or reluctantly sitting on doorsteps as I completed a questionnaire. In these very practical ways, acquiring a husband was a useful fieldwork strategy, and having Karel as a partner had a rather positive impact on my fieldwork.

On some level my forming a committed relationship to a *Santiago* (person from Santiago) seemed to be understood as a gesture to people I was working with of the good faith I had in committing myself to experiencing life in Cuba. It is very common for young Cubans to have committed relationships that quickly lead to cohabitation or marriage, and sexual and romantic relationships are quite openly pursued, so within a framework of Cuban expectations our relationship was nothing unusual. Indeed, many of my informants were pleased to know that I had a boyfriend to 'take care of me' and 'accompany me'. As anthropologist Rose Jones found elsewhere in the Caribbean, people would probably have worried for me had I not had a boyfriend or husband present during the majority of my fieldwork (Jones 1999). Karel's own relatively unobjectionable status as a suitor—since he was white, well educated, employed, single and childless—increased the likelihood of our relationship helping rather than harming my position within the community where I was working. In a society that is highly charged with complex social, political, racial and economic tensions, had my future husband been black, uneducated, unemployed, married, and fathered multiple children, I imagine that my relationship would not have been so well received, and might have been seen by some of my informants to reflect an inferior capacity for judgement of appropriate behaviour. (For discussions of the politics of 'race' in contemporary Cuba, see De la Fuente 2001:317-34, Fernández 1996.)

Nevertheless, although our romance seemed to be received for the most part with pleasure and approval, being a foreigner in a relationship with a Cuban certainly placed me within a series of social categories that some anthropologists might be keen to avoid. The economic significance of US dollars and the massive expansion of the tourist industry in the post-Soviet era have made the sexual politics of foreigner-Cuban relationships a minefield in which allegations of predatory sexuality and immoral greed are common (Fernández 1999, see also Brennan 2004 for a comparable discussion on the Dominican Republic). In both local and international accounts of the growth of sex tourism and transnational marriages in Cuba, foreigners are often represented as desperate for youthful flesh while Cubans are characterised as desperate for US dollars. Both sides of such relationships can seem to be built upon the pursuit of unlikely and even immoral dreams.

Although many Cubans recognise that if they had a romance with a foreigner they would enjoy the opportunities of improved economic security and new life experiences,

assessing the propriety of their friends and neighbours' relationships with foreigners is a common practice in which assessments may range from envy, encouragement or amusement, to scathing judgement and deep cynicism (Pertiera 2006, Rundle 2001). My presence in Santiago as a foreigner involved in a romantic and sexual relationship with a local inevitably placed me within a complex framework of gendered and racialised economics and politics which forced me to recognise my own deeply personal enmeshings in the economic and moral disjunctures that separate people living inside Cuba from those visiting from outside. This dichotomy is made especially sharp in post-Soviet Cuba, where the Cuban government encourages forms of 'tourist apartheid' to minimise contact between citizens and foreigners, and where residents face great difficulties in leaving the country even temporarily (Eckstein 2003:88-126, Rundle 2001). My presence as an anthropologist rather than a short-term tourist, and Karel's apparent suitability as an 'authentic' companion, did little to convince me that I was somehow very different to the sex tourists or whirlwind romancers that prompted so many of my informants to roll their eyes with disdain.

In a moving epilogue to his book *Wizards and Scientists*, on tradition and modernity in Cuba, anthropologist Stephan Palmié tells of his disgust in sharing a long flight home from Cuba with a German sex tourist, who relishes recounting his sexual exploits and demonstrates the degree to which Cubans—and especially black Cubans—have in many ways returned to their historical position of flesh for sale (Palmié 2002:260-89). When reading of Palmié's own discomfort in being identified by German sex tourists either as a fellow foreign traveller or as an expert to consult in understanding their own intercultural sexual encounters, I was reminded of my own discomfort in being one of a long line of foreigners to become inevitably engaged with the sensual and emotional encounters that are constitutive of what Palmié analyses as a form of 'carnal modernity' embodied in contemporary Cuba (Palmié 2002:260-89).

Palmié's discomfort shows that even anthropologists who do not form romantic or sexual relationships in the field must grapple with the degree to which they are entangled in the complex politics of relationships, and the degree to which such relationships influence their ethnographic research (see also Wilmore 2001). In openly engaging in a romantic (and by implication, sexual) encounter with a (more or less) local I was forced to face my own position along the continuum of fraught foreigner-local engagements in a particularly confronting way. Thus, while more traditionally romantic hallmarks such as poetry, wine and roses did play a part in my story of falling in love, from the very beginning my love story also included countless struggles with, experiences of and reflections upon the very issues that surrounded my anthropological research. Nowhere did these struggles become more apparent than in the weeks leading up to my wedding day!

The wedding

For a short time in April 2004, my official fieldwork was sidelined amid the negotiation of invitation lists, the caretaking of a few well-travelled guests from my distant Australian life, and the general anxiety that can consume even the most cynical of brides. However, it was precisely in these weeks that many of the deepest insights into my field

research were gleaned, as I myself embarked in earnest upon the same struggles of hunting for goods that occupied the lives of my informants. Although I had by then adjusted to a somewhat sheltered form of the daily efforts invested in shopping for groceries and basic items, in preparing for the wedding I was for the first time thrown into the particular investment of frenzied energy required to create a 'special' moment of escape from the everyday. In retrospect, I realise that the inconveniences and shortages I had encountered in daily life before the wedding had not greatly troubled me because I was able to see them as curious components of a temporary life 'in the field'. In contrast, when I started to organise this event that would clearly have consequence for my permanent life 'beyond the field', the stresses and frustrations of being a consumer in Cuba made a richer and more serious impact upon my sense of self. I had previously intellectually understood the struggles for consumption faced by Cuban women, and had certainly empathised with them, yet in planning the wedding I felt for the first time an emotional intensity and stress associated with seemingly minor struggles to acquire material goods that began to approach the desperation and frustration about which most of my informants had often lamented.

We were hardly planning the wedding of the decade. But with a registry office ceremony, a guest list restricted to 70 of Karel's nearest and dearest, and a party in the courtyard of a friend's crumbling colonial house, we faced logistical challenges of seemingly epic proportions. Many of the strategies for acquiring goods that I had observed in the previous months of my fieldwork unfolded throughout the wedding planning, and for the first time I had the opportunity to endeavour on many of my own struggles for consumption, enacting the same strategies, both local and global, through which my informants make ends meet. Many of these strategies relied on the goodwill of extended kin and friendship networks;¹ here, a neighbour drove Karel to the countryside to find a good fat pig for the barbecue, there a friend arranged for some chairs to be borrowed overnight from a community centre. As for many Cubans, these networks of contacts that enabled goods to appear spanned across the globe; from Miami, where Karel's uncles and aunts sent money and good wishes, to Sydney, where my own family and friends were put to work sourcing crucial consumer goods absent from the shelves of Santiago shops. The contents of my mother's suitcase at the José Martí airport in Havana would have raised eyebrows amongst even the most hardened of Cuban customs officials, filled as it was with fairy lights, bottles of champagne, energy-efficient light bulbs, and metres of tulle.

Many of the items taken for granted on the shopping lists of wedding planners elsewhere in the world proved to be elusive in the Santiago retail sector. It was with joy and some anxiety that I swooped upon a chance supply of disposable napkins and plastic glasses sitting in the corner of a downtown dollar shop, no doubt depriving all other city residents from any hope of celebrating their own parties in suitable style. Rice, that most basic of ingredients, was one of the hardest things to acquire in large quantities, as it is usually only bought through state-controlled rationing, and few Cubans would have any left over

¹ The anthropological literature on the importance of social networks in informal economies is vast. See previous citations on the informal economy in socialist societies. For comparable research in the Caribbean, see Freeman (1997). Other examples of ethnographies ranging from Africa to the United Kingdom include Hart (1973, 1988), Mollona (2005), and Nelson (1997).

to sell on the black market. My mother-in-law called upon her impressive network of informal suppliers, whose sidelines buying from and selling to the housewives of Santiago are a crucial invisible component of the city's stuttering economy. As is the case with so many of the purchases that enable life to go on in urban Cuba, nobody ever really knew where all that rice had come from (Pérez-López 1995, Pertierra 2006).

Sometimes, domestic production and creative appropriation were brought into play, as when Karel himself scaled a frangipani tree to pick the flowers that my mother shaped into a bouquet, using ribbon and tulle left over from the wrap she had sewn. At other moments, hired labour was necessary for tasks that were beyond us, such as the building of a brick barbecue and rejuvenating the garden of the house that our friend had so generously lent us. But in *all* the examples of triumphant acquisition that comprised the planning of our wedding, the obstacles created by goods shortages, unreliable supplies, economic difficulties and legal barriers were overcome or evaded through the strategic deployment of social ties to smooth the path for mixtures of legal and illegal transactions and overt and covert acquisitions. As my informants had been telling me for months, in Cuba you have to be inventive if you want to get anything done.

In many ways our wedding was a microcosm of the aspects of Cuban economic and social life that puzzled and intrigued me throughout my research. Many of the moments that became my most treasured memories of the wedding—such as the surprise performance of one of the city's best bands, and the romantic atmosphere of the colonial courtyard—were embarrassingly cheap or even absolutely free, as we were buffered from the harshness of first-world wedding prices. But other aspects of the wedding, which would in other circumstances have been minor details, became matters of enormous dimensions, requiring hours of work and ongoing stress. In such matters as finding plates and napkins or buying large quantities of rice, much more than money is needed to be successful, as the random nature of dollar shop stock levels, and the limitations of the remaining socialist distribution system, can make even black market purchases impossible. Such factors as the donated labour of friends, access to local traders' networks, workplace contacts, relatives visiting from abroad, and use of private transportation were crucial to our success in planning the wedding. Such factors are also what differentiate the most socially and materially successful of my informants in Santiago from their less fortunate neighbours, as smaller enactments of very similar consumption struggles are how women in my fieldsite regularly managed to keep their families fed, clothed and cleaned.

Although the wedding had never been a planned component of my fieldwork, in reality it became a highly informative ethnographic moment—and one might think that such a revelation might be an entirely positive addition to the fieldwork experience. However, the blending of the artificial boundaries between 'fieldwork' and 'life' that I had largely unthinkingly established in my fieldwork routines was also a source of acute discomfort, as I was forced to face some surprising revelations about the disjuncture that surfaced between my intellectual commitment to the field and my emotional distance from it. Although my emotional involvement in Cuban consumption through planning the wedding was very enlightening for my fieldwork, it also forced me to recognise the degree to which I had previously maintained an emotional distance from my informants' experiences—a realisation that made me deeply uncomfortable.

The vulnerable participant

In discussing what she sees as the vulnerability of the anthropologist as observer, Behar (1997) argues that anthropologists must constantly engage in a difficult negotiation of their connection to, and their distance from, the people they are studying. Whilst doing 'good' fieldwork usually requires the capacity to make meaningful, empathetic connections with field informants, writing a 'good' ethnography also demands a clinical capacity to leave the field behind—intellectually if not geographically—in order to write, analyse and critique. Behar suggests that to produce anthropology that is critical and insightful requires one to open up observation and writing in a way that makes the anthropologist vulnerable (ibid:1-33).

Despite the very real struggles that the ambiguous role of anthropologist could and did create within my fieldwork, I personally found that this struggle, being principally one that could seemingly be exorcised through reflection and intellectual debate, was in itself something of a comfort zone. However, although the reflexive debates of anthropologists such as Behar might have prepared me intellectually to expect a difficult negotiation of my own identity and position as an ethnographer, it was much harder for me to cope with surprising and strong emotional shifts that were more directly related to my personal life, as in the case of my wedding. It was precisely when pushed to move from the role of a participant-observer doing fieldwork, into being a full-fledged participant engaging in activities that were for entirely other goals, that I suddenly felt most vulnerable. Gone were my crutches of cultural relativism and of difficult experiences being more grist for the thesis mill; it was *my* wedding and I had to be *in* it, there was no safe ground of distanced observation to be had.

The degree of emotional transition that I had to make in adjusting to this idea of being a bride rather than an anthropologist made me realise the degree to which my entire experience of researching Cuba had been shaped by a certain distance from my informants which was underlying all my more conscious attempts to 'belong'. I can see the reflections of these broader emotional shifts that so affected my self-understanding (both within and beyond fieldwork) in several particularly fraught debates that took place during my wedding planning. In fine anthropological tradition, these debates seemed little more than predictable, innocent and banal disputes between a bride and her soon-to-be family. Also in fine anthropological tradition—and in a very neat echo of the issues I was exploring in my research—the most traumatic disputes centred upon food and display, most specifically around what and how much food we would serve, what it should look like, and what we should serve it on.

While I had been perfectly fascinated to study the cultural practices of food acquisition and preparation that formed such an important part of daily life in Cuba, when it came to serving food at my wedding I was filled with horror and shame at the prospect of serving what I personally felt to be a meagre buffet of sandwiches and pasta salad instead of the sumptuous feast that my non-Cuban heritages had led me to envisage. At a typical Cuban wedding reception, large quantities of food are not expected (mostly because such quantities are rarely available). Even at generously catered functions, a light afternoon tea or a pasta salad and cake will typically be served, and hot meals are largely reserved for much smaller parties held within immediate families. My own upbringing in both the Philippines and Australia had provided me with quite a different vision of appropriate

wedding catering, and I was genuinely sad to know that particular kinds of food that were very meaningful to me were simply impossible in the context of Cuban scarcity. Although the food we eventually served up seemed truly excessive by contemporary Cuban wedding standards, it took me literally weeks to emotionally adjust to the idea that a party organised as a supposedly defining moment in my life could possibly include a menu of roast pork and plantains—food that seemed perfectly acceptable as a component of fieldwork to be endured, but which was undeniably *other* and not at all *me*.

Even more difficult to incorporate into an image of my own wedding (an image I had not even thought existed until it was challenged!) was the presence of plastic plates and disposable cutlery, items of relative prestige in Cuba given their scarcity, but which in my own mind were undeniably associated with hot summer picnics and low-budget departmental parties. Those plastic plates made me doubly ashamed, as I was extremely ashamed to feel such shame over minor details of material culture. I was acutely aware of Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of my own attitudes towards such items as being little more than class warfare, and yet my own professional interest in the nuances of material culture as tools for the creation of distinction seemed unable to temper the emotional extremes that the presence of disposable cutlery momentarily evoked.

Even the most prepared of anthropologists can have moments of naivety, and mine had been to assume that my concept of a 'simple' wedding was not laden with complex assertions of my own identity and status. As I increasingly realised, my insistence upon the aesthetics of elegant simplicity was in itself a complex series of objectifications that distinguished my own aesthetic sense from those of the Cubans invited to my wedding (Bourdieu 1984). I became increasingly uncomfortable with the degree to which my own insistence upon a 'simple' wedding cake and a 'generous' buffet were little more than ethnocentric demands, which Karel and his family were struggling against the odds to fulfil. Try as we all might to find compromises between the differing visions of what a wedding between a local son and a foreign anthropologist should be, it became increasingly clear that nobody's expectations could possibly be met—and worse, that I could never meet everyone's expectations of a beautiful (or at least beautifully behaved) bride. I struggled—as so many people in intercultural encounters have struggled before me—with the impossibility of negotiating such differing expectations, and with the dissatisfaction of being acutely aware of my own culturally biased emotions, which my years of training as an anthropologist could do nothing to erase, despite my wishing that the difficulties such emotions were inflicting upon others involved in the wedding planning as well as upon myself could have disappeared.

In such a context, the prospect of returning to the role of participant-observer seemed the very opposite of vulnerable. Although Behar talks of the difficulties associated with sitting in-between observation and participation, in my own experience there were much greater challenges to be met in the moments where I could not problematise the people around me as 'informants', but was forced to discard the protective mantle, flawed as it is, of participant observation.

Conclusion

In the more than two years that have passed since our wedding, Karel and I have moved on to overcome new sorts of challenges. In moving to London together we have had to adjust to marriage in a very different environment. We face many of the cultural, economic, linguistic and bureaucratic obstacles common to transnational relationships—for the most part rather successfully. But so far no event in our relationship—whether it involves visa processing, job hunting, home making or socialising—has informed or challenged my anthropological work in the way that our wedding did.

Although my postgraduate training had sent me into the field fully aware of the ethical and methodological dilemmas that the seemingly paradoxical process of participant observation must involve, I could never have predicted just when and how my own emotional vulnerability might transform my experience of fieldwork in ways that were sometimes joyful, sometimes very challenging, and often both at once. Even more interestingly for me, although I had begun my fieldwork being very comfortable with the notion that participant observation is a markedly holistic process, expecting that a fluidity always exists between personal experiences and research encounters, what I was eventually quite confronted by was my own response to needing to separate ‘field’ from ‘life’. During my fieldwork, I was deeply aware of the potential for the moral and economic context of my relationship to Karel to erode our own confidence in each other, and my informants’ confidence in me. As we began to plan the wedding, I found myself echoing Ruth Behar in hoping that my celebration would not become ‘just another anthropological fieldsite’, and yet I was surprised at the emotional confusion I encountered in establishing an identity as a bride rather than a fieldworker. However artificial and tentative a separation of fieldwork and personal identities might be, I felt that the alternative—to entirely merge both work-life and lovelife—would create even more problems, making not only my doctoral thesis but perhaps more importantly my marriage too vulnerable to the hardship of academic scrutiny and critique.

Such divisions between ‘fieldwork’ and ‘personal life’ seemed equally important to maintain in the subsequent writing up of my thesis. I wanted to protect my doctoral work from becoming flooded with my own stories of love and marriage, and I wanted to protect my own emotions and those of people important to me from the tumultuous debates of anthropological discussion. Although the very nature of fieldwork invariably gives rise to a productive blending of unexpected encounters and planned research, the mental divisions between ‘work’ and ‘life’ that I suspect we all create as fieldworkers are also useful survival mechanisms.

In conclusion, then, what dynamic is played out between these mental separations in our ethnographic work? Ironically, it was not until I momentarily dropped my role as a participant-observer that I managed to gain a new level of understanding of the emotional processes that organising consumption in post-Soviet Cuba involve. This suggests that it was precisely by suspending my identity as an anthropologist that I subsequently returned to my ethnographic analysis with an enriched understanding of the field, since I had not even fully realised my own degree of emotional distance from my informants until I was plunged into a necessarily more intimate set of relationships that were predicated upon my personal commitment to Karel and his family rather than my professional commitment to a fieldsite. Although these rather artificial distinctions I made between my

work as an anthropologist and my life as a bride were necessary and even productive, it was ultimately also through challenging the limitations of such divisions that I was able to put both fieldwork and love-life to best use within the context of my doctoral research.

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