

## THE ETHICS OF ANTHROPO- LOGICAL OBSERVATION

Entrevista com  
**LINA FRUZZETTI**

Lina Fruzzetti, professor of anthropology at Brown

University, Rhode Island, is an anthropologist for whom anthropology is not pertinent – or at least distinct from other social sciences – unless it is anchored in an extended period of fieldwork. Her first and longest ethnographic research was carried out in India, the rituals and social relations of which were the subject of her first book, *The Gift of a Virgin: Women, Marriage, and Ritual in a Bengali Society*, published by Rutgers University Press in 1982. It was reedited with a new preface, “Some Contemporary Issues in Context”, by Oxford University Press in 1990. In this work intimate subjectivity and objectivity (whatever this means in anthropology) are disconcertingly combined in an analysis of social life and ritual in the village of Vishnupur, Bengal. The author foregrounds women as a privileged “place” of observation due to their insertion in a vast social network as well as membership in a distinct female universe outside of the realm of male power – male and female worlds which are not exclusive but rather complementary.

In 1982, along with Akos Ostor and Steve Barnett, Fruzzetti edited *Concepts of Person: Kinship, Caste and Marriage in India* (Oxford University Press), an important reference in the anthropology of India. The volume is the result of theoretical discussions held with Louis Dumont over the course of 1973 at Princeton. In often unexpected ways, the volume critiques the Dumontian thesis as to the nonexistence of the individual within the caste system. It does so by exploring notions of personhood as articulated in cultural categories and social behavior.

In 1998, with *Women, Orphans, and Poverty: Social Movements and Ideologies of Work in India*, Lina Fruzzetti returns to Bengal to explore the construction of gender in India, as well as the expectations for a change in gender roles and the failure with which those expectations are met. This failure is largely due, paradoxically, to the invisibility of women in the public sphere because their social work takes place in the *homes* that were structurally conceived during the period of Indian nationalism.

It was also in the 1990s that Lina Fruzzetti tried her hand at documentary films. She started with *Seed and Earth*, about “her” old rural Bengal, which won prizes at different international ethnographic film festivals. Resulting from her work in Africa and defending the absolute necessity of anthropological knowledge on the reality to be filmed, her last film is about handicapped persons in Tanzania (a category that includes women). The film sold out days before its run in the screening room of the *Margaret Mead Festival* of 2000 at New York’s Museum of Natural History, dedicated precisely to the international documentary and ethnographic film.

Por  
**ROSA PEREZ**

**ROSA PEREZ – When one looks at your**

*personal itinerary – and professional, of course – one gets quite puzzled. In fact, you were born in Eritrea then you were risen up in Sudan, you made your studies in the United States, and at the end you have done a long-term fieldwork research in West Bengal. How did you end up in India?*

**LINA FRUZZETTI** – Well, I come from two different sorts of parentage, Italian and Eritrean, and my father was an engineer in Mussolini's army and he just opted to stay there even after the war was over. He and my mother were married and he died when I was three and a half years old and my mother, for political and familiar reasons, decided to move to Sudan where I went to a boarding school with Italian nuns. They were running one of the most prestigious schools in North Africa, and because some of these nuns knew my father who had helped them earlier on they provided me and my brother free education in this exclusive school. So, I was trained well, and really had a very excellent education. When I finished high school I was given the option of going to Rome to study or to Chicago, and I opted to go to Chicago.

**RP** – *Why Chicago?*

**LF** – For reasons that really didn't have much rationality at the time. I just liked Chicago because of what I thought Chicago was, and the way I constructed the image from movies and films, that's all cowboys and Indians; of course, to my surprise I find that none of that existed there. But, the four years I spent in that college, where I studied International Price Theory, the idea was to do something which would help me gaining or finding a job, and that was a serious sort of subject even though it was not really a passion of mine. When I

finished college, I received a five-year-fellowship to do Agricultural Economics from the American Women University and they provided me with a significant fellowship. But during that summer I went to hear a lecture, totally by accident. It was a lecture given by an African-American anthropologist, whose name was Sinclair Drake, who had worked in East Africa. His lecture was on rituals of Kikuyu and I was so fascinated with these issues about culture and values and tradition, that it just turned my head completely. Therefore, I waited until the end and – I had never done this before, but – I went up to him and I asked him to tell me some more, made an appointment to see him in the very next day. He basically told me what anthropology was, how he did his research and I asked if he would take me as a student, at least for a year. He agreed and so I trained with him for a year.

Unfortunately, after that he went to Stanford and I didn't want to leave.

I stayed on and it was also the summer that I had met my husband, my current husband, Akos Ostor. He was finishing his doctorate at the University of Chicago and getting ready to do his research in India. So, I was introduced to India, as all his friends, anybody of the faculty that mattered to him were really working on India with the exception of David Schneider. So, we got married and ended up in India.

**RP** – *Which was again a totally different world... How did you live this new experience?*

**LF** – In India I was fascinated, again, by Muslims and the idea of identity. I worked with the Muslims then, and all the data that I collected was useful, because I used it for my masters in the University of Chicago, where I had in 1970 embarked on the masters' degree, and after that I went to the University of Minnesota.

In Minnesota I did some more graduate work and also did intensive language training. I returned again to India, in 1971, with a baby, my first, which was Leila Ostor and I thought it was interesting that I had a baby when I went to the field, because having a baby, a child, and being married gave me entry into a number of things that I didn't think I would have been able to do before. Women were

**LF** – My work, at least my kind of anthropology, is not really just about theory; it is not divorced and separated from, let's say, people. So, when we work as anthropologists we are working in such close proximity with a group, a family, and a person that they become a part of us. When we work with them, we interview them, we are basically reflecting issues and concerns that we have about us and about



Lina Fruzzetti

talking to me about issues and concerns that they had with children, birth, rituals of marriage and so on, fertility issues that they didn't discuss the first time I was there for those two years. Therefore, one child introduced me into a study in concern to women that really fashioned the way I looked at anthropology, but also the way I looked at comparative studies of gender and so forth.

**RP** – *Before moving to your long and important research on gender studies, there is something that always impressed me on your work, which is the humanist tone that crosses all your writing – which is not a post-modernist issue at all. Can you comment on this?*

our own world. They become really an extension of who we are. So, it is not about theory, it is about people and when you deal with people you really have to treat them the way you yourself want to be treated. They become living subjects, and when you write about them, you are writing about real people that you have let behind. They were not like empty data, they were like – how do I explain it? You cry with them, you laugh with them; you have times of highs and lows with them. So, in that sense, yes, it is closer to be a humanistic approach than it is to be a theoretical one.

**RP** – *I apologise for keeping on asking you personal questions in spite of going straight to*

*your theoretical work (although they can not of course be divorced). I would say that you are a universalistic, in the sense that you belong to many countries and to any country at all. I feel that Bengal could be your permanent country and the way you speak about Bengal and Bengali culture, people, literature, art and artists, is as if it was an important part of your identity. How do you share this Bengali identity with your other identities?*

**LF** – Yes, Bengal is really my... it could be my home. When I am in Bengal, I feel right there, it is like if I have not left, and I think that it is also good that I can speak the language and I have met some friends there. I have lived there on and off for about 8 years, so I had a special relationship with Bengal, even though I have travelled and I know people in other parts of India, and I think my relationship has to do with where I grew up as an anthropologist, where I was allowed to do my work and where I was given access and entering into people lives, private lives, social lives. Coming in so young and early on in my life, I never had a door closed on me. In fact I had more doors open when I wanted access to people, and I keep telling my students that one of the ways that you can do it is to respect people the way you also want to be respected. Without respect, I say, you can't really go further than a step. People are very sensitive to how you feel about them and they can just completely shun you if you are not really honest. I think respect and honesty are the two things that we as anthropologists have to carry ahead of our paper and pencil and other collections or pictures taken. So, it is not important to just go in there and just immediately ask the questions but it might take six months, it might take one week. It depends on how you establish who you are and what you want to do with the people. I felt that they accepted me, and it

is true that when I am there I feel I am a Bengalian.

**RP** – *But you also did research “at home”, in Tanzania and in Sudan...*

**LF** – Yes, I also did research in Tanzania and in Sudan where I grew up, but to do research in a place and grow up in that place is difficult. So, that research was much more difficult than being in India. Bengalis have always been very accepting and I felt at home, but I know that for some anthropologists this is very difficult. I hope I have answered your question.

**RP** – *Yes, you did. I mentioned two features that always strike me and I think that always strike anybody who reads your books, your papers, your articles, or who listens to your conferences. I spoke about humanism, then universalism. I can't avoid mentioning another factor that I relate very much to you, which is vanguardism. In fact, before gender studies became fashionable, you were already in the field. And you were quite concerned about nation and nationalism long before they became attractive subjects for anthropologists.*

**LF** – Besides the research on nationalism, identity and ethnicity, I also teach on these subjects. I think it has to do with who one is and this has always been a question that faced me. You go back in life, you go back to yourself, and you go back to whom you are. There are times when I really don't know, not that it really matters, or it has completely upset me to the point where I stopped working, but I do belong to and grew up in a world of two parents, cultures and values. I mean born and belong to two separate identities, Italian and Eritrean.

I lived in Sudan where I have got very steeped into Arab culture and Sudanese

culture. I went to the United States to study and I met my husband, who is himself a displaced person, a refugee from Hungary, having gone to Australia in 1956. So, all of this is going to impact on you, all of this mixed history is going to sort of affect you, be the central question that keeps coming up, the question of one's identity: who are we and who is this person that I am trying to get to know, who is a woman, who is a man, what does a person mean, what is a person made of? Identity has always really underlined everything I do. When I worked in the Sudan I was looking at the identity of a rural person, in terms of what has economic development done to this person, what is the relationship of this person to Islam and so on. So, it was centred again on bringing a person, trying to understand what the underlining basis of this person is. The same thing happens with looking at women in a study of construction of gender, what is a woman all about, culturally, symbolically. When I teach courses I tell the students that we all talk about women, we talk about gender but we should not assume that, just because we all have a biological sort of consistency, that kind of similarity must be taken with the assumption that we are all the same. In fact, there is a difference. So, I don't look at the universality of people that way, but I acknowledge that there is difference and I acknowledge that difference is essential to understanding the other. If I as an individual eliminate the existing essential difference I will have destroyed that person because what I am doing is taking that person and making him or her into my own reflect, into my own sort of extension. So, I allow a Tanzanian to be a Tanzanian, I allow a person, a Kikuyu in Kenya to be who she or he is, and then I begin to assert other common grounds between me an Eritrean, let's say, and this person in

Kenya or the person in the village that I worked in, in West Bengal. What is it that draws us together? What are some of the common themes? I think that the idea of identity whether you look at it from the study of the construction of gender or of religion and development, as I did in Sudan, or from the study of the spread of disease, as I have done in Ethiopia, about the spread of HIV and how people contract that disease or, for that matter, the study of orphans in Calcutta, it all boils down to some basic understanding of the notion of person. The question of identity: what makes a person who she is and what makes somebody else a different sort of person? Once we establish identities we talk about communalities, but we cannot universalise the individual before we understand who that individual is in the first place.

**RP** – *Well, I think that's what anthropology is all about and maybe this is why your work is so coherent in the whole. Now, one question that I would like to ask you is the following: your research, your lecturing, as well as your written work in anthropology have a perfect coherency, and suddenly, at the same time that you teach at Brown, that you keep on writing articles and books, and publishing, you move to the film documentary field. Do you feel at ease with this different way of seeing people and culture?*

**LF** – The written and the visual are not much different. I don't think I could have done the film *Seed and Earth* unless I had written about the subject of women, kinship and ritual. Having written about them, I thought I could have access into the quality of life – not that I had conceptualised it, but I could understand the ideas and then draw it out visually for somebody to actually perceive it the way I had perceived it. So, the visual is much more powerful for somebody who actually

worked on the subject, but to do visually a film that is meaningful about a subject matter that you don't know much about, it is going to be difficult. You will get a totally different picture. So, the words and the picture are one and the same, I think they reflect the same message. I can only do a film about a subject that I really have done some research on, having understood the parameters and the structure of the subject matter. For example, a future film that I anticipate doing, also to be written as a book, preceding the film, is the telling of a story of a woman, my mother, who was a widow at eighteen, with my brother and myself. This widow is illiterate, and never went to school. My mother ran away from school when she was thirteen or fourteen, and fell in love with my father. Although my mother didn't know how to read or write, she was a very successful business-woman. She used her thumb, you know, to mark her papers and documents. This is a woman who insisted that I attend college after I completed High School, even though most of my classmates (there were only seven in the class) were going to get married. I wanted to do the same. She said, "No, no, you can't do that, you have to go and study some more. You have to study what I did not study". Thus I have had this fear of failing all my life. I wasn't afraid of what the world would think of me, but I was worried about what my mother would think. So, every time I finished a degree I would tell her and she would say, "there is one more, there is one more". When I finished the PhD, she asked: "Isn't there another one?" I said no. This is why I would like to do a film about her, but I would also like to write her story because it is a type of woman the world has to understand and learn from. Women like that never get voiced or visually represented in a world like ours, which is about degrees, rewards,

and acclaim. But that kind of acclaim that we strike for perhaps misses some of the more interesting sort of people that imprinted in our lives. This is one film, but also soon in the fall, Akos and I along with two other film makers in India are going to do a series of small films. One is a life history of three or four people that we worked with over the past twenty to twenty-five years, to sort of represent them visually, for I have already written about them. Another will be to do a study on the Tigers of Bengal, in the Sunderban (The Magic Forest) and look at the condition of widows out there. So, we have three or four ideas that we want to work on now and it is again about putting pictures towards what has been written.

**RP** – *You have directed documentaries on India and on Tanzania. Now you are planning to make a film about your mother. Aren't you afraid of working about sameness? Your own mother, a part of yourself; you, that have always chosen to study otherness. How do you feel about this apparently complete change?*

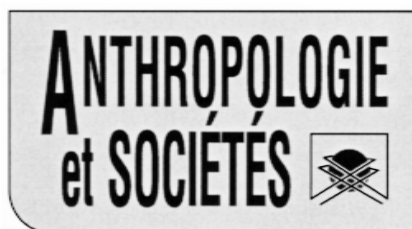
**LF** – It is an excellent question and this is why it took me all this time to really slowly come to terms with doing something that I have avoided for a long time. This is not the first time I have started a project with her, with my mother, and stopped. But, I think, right now I am ready and the reason I am ready is that I am going to take a totally different angle in doing this story of hers. My mother has been active helping with the Eritrean Liberation Front and she has sort of helped all kinds of people, a lot of Eritreans who were refugees in Sudan in multiple ways. So, what I want to do is not just to write about these events. We are two different individuals, my mother and I, different in many ways. I am my mother's daughter but we are different. Our difference comes



in the way we experience things. Where I might be less tolerant she might be a bit more tolerant, and vice-versa. So, my question, my angle is to look at the development of the new nation-state of Eritrea, and to ask her to tell the story of the fight for liberation, the solution to the fight and the resultant effects of the thirty years of civil war. What in her own eyes, does she really think we have accomplished and whether she feels that accomplishment has justified the bloodshed. So, this is what I want to do, to ask her about what she thinks of nationalism, what is her vision for the future of the place. My mother would have incredible insights. So, in that sense, there is an emotional tie between me and her because she is my mother, but at the same time she is an individual, she has her own way of thinking, her own way of seeing things, that I might completely disagree with. She is very tolerant with the younger generation and she has some incredible insights that I would like to put down on paper, for whatever reasons, and I feel that she has a lot to teach; to teach me and to members of my family, but also to teach the people around her. You know she has raised a lot of kids in her life, she has raised close to

twenty one kids and the last one is still at home, she is about 23 years old now. They were all young girls, except three, which were boys: two Sudanese twin boys and a third one who was half Eritrean, half Sudanese. The rest were all girls, who might have had a living parent but my mother would assist in raising them. Again going back to my fascination with orphans and abandoned young kids, it was really not out of the place, it was something that had to do with her, with what she has done for many abandoned children. Even my fascination with studying gender again had to do with the power of this Eritrean woman and what I've learned from the women around me during my early childhood. So, it wasn't just being in India, being fascinated by Indian women; I was always drawing an extension of myself into the subject I was studying. If you don't, the subject you study becomes less interesting, more problematic and at times it becomes disrespectful.

**RP** – *We come back to the same issue I was pointing out, which was the universalism and humanism that underlines your research. This is a lesson, I think, for all of us, not so much as researchers, but as human beings, and thank you so much for teaching us this side of life that anthropology doesn't cope very well with.*



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17.3 Masques d'insusqués  
18.1 Localismes  
18.2 Réver la culture  
18.3 Pratiques culturelles et  
marchandises  
19.1-2 Retour sur le don  
19.3 Pouvoirs de l'ethnicité  
20.1 Savoirs et  
gouvernementalité  
20.2 Algérie aux marges du  
religieux  
20.3 La nature culturelle  
21.1 Confluences  
21.2-3 Comparaisons régionales  
22.1 Afriques revisitées  
22.2 Médiations claustriques  
22.3 Culture et modernité au  
Japon  
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Une bibliographie sélective  
*Steve Plante*

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