

Exchanges / Intercambios

**Reflections on *The Art of Memory*:
*An Ethnographer's Journey*¹, by Stefano Varese**

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These few lines of reflection on *The Art of Memory* have been hard to write, because Stefano is such a dear friend and I want to do right by him, because the topics he raises are so momentous, but also, because reading the book brought me so much pleasure that I feel compelled to do my best to reciprocate. In successive evenings over the past month, I read a chapter or two while sipping mescal, at times pausing to discuss a detail with Melissa, once even calling our friends Paola and Guille in Oaxaca to share thoughts, going to sleep with Stefano's remarkable life on my mind. A text can induce pleasure in many different ways—as we marvel at the depth of an insight, feel called in by some

¹ Stefano Varese, *The Art of Memory: An Ethnographer's Journey* (Raleigh: Editorial A Contracorriente / University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

connection to our own lives, by the sheer emotional force conveyed—and *The Art of Memory* did all this for me. But these moments of pleasure fully congeal only if the prose is well-crafted, if (as I always used to tell graduate students) you give the language tender loving care, and if the writer manages to lighten the load of even the weightiest topics with words that sooth, bring a smile to the reader's face, or perhaps even a quiet chuckle. There are many such passages in this book, and since I read it in English, we have to thank Margaret Randall as well as Stefano for this pleasure. I want to begin by sharing just one of these with you—a passage that also evoked my own memory of our family, crossing the border from Texas into Mexico, wondering if we should hide our dog Sandy under the seat: Stefano and Linda crossing into Mexico, in exile from the military coup in Peru, and the border agent asks, “do you have any weapons”? No, they responded, “should we”?



Another source of pleasure in this book is the amazing photographs. Their grainy black-and-white texture remind us that we are reaching deeply into a past century: the radiant beauty of an early photo of Linda seals our intuitive

grasp of Stefano's love for her like no words could; the shot of the four—Stefano, Linda and two smiling children—laying the foundation of their house in San Felipe del Agua powerfully conveys the difficulty of the decision a few years later to leave Oaxaca. And the cover photo of Coronado and Stefano, attached to our fridge for some weeks now, which beckons and provokes so powerfully that a new insight emerges each time I take it in. Following Stefano's example of an unflinchingly critical stance toward our own discipline, we must not ignore the image's slight whiff of anthropology's colonialist past, which would become a present danger if we were not to acknowledge it fully. At the same time, in keeping with another through-line in the book—Stefano's warm embrace of contradiction—the photo conveys all that I love most about ethnography: the adventure of living outside your comfort zone; the intensely mind-expanding experience of learning through cultural difference; the radicalizing potential of that commitment to live, listen and learn with empathy. I associate all this with the book's subtitle—*An Ethnographer's Journey*.

The title also is especially apt in alluding to “memory work” not as mere chronological narrative, but as a higher art form, allowing the text to unfold in a way that resembles how our memories actually work: as excerpts recovered from a dusty archive, some brief, others extended, in patterns suggesting that the very act of remembering, and committing words to the page, brings forth yet another folder in the archive, previously unopened, or perhaps, too painful or perplexing to retrieve. At its core this book is not so much about what happened and with whom—although we certainly can read it that way with ample reward—but rather, what did that mean? Stefano asks: how to make sense of each juncture, each twist and turn, in my own life and what might others learn from my reflections? As we have been taught especially by feminist theorists, these junctures always have intimate, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, which inform the institutional, structural and explicitly ideological. Stefano makes this insight his north star, which required great clarity of purpose. In this sense, though as Lynn Stephen laments in her foreword, Stefano narrates a largely masculine institutional world, the memory arts he deploys bear little

resemblance to the alpha male memoir genre, and may even be said to have a feminist aspiration.

The contradictions and limitations of the Velasco Revolution became evident soon enough. It seemed to us that the revolutionary generals hadn't foreseen the fact that the people's needs were going to require much more rapid and radical advances than they were prepared to establish.

When the government expropriated the national newspapers and gave them to worker, peasant, and professional organizations; when it made Quechua a national language on an equal footing with Spanish and introduced it as a written language in the official register; and when, under these directives from above, Quechua-speaking Andeans and the country's other Indigenous peoples began to feel that perhaps they could stop being foreigners in their own land, the mobilization and popular participation the generals had wanted to control and restrict went beyond their ability to do so.

More and more, the reforms seemed insufficient, and more and more the old privations and sufferings produced an eagerness for total solutions: all the land for those who work it, all the factories for the workers, all the mines for the miners, all the sea with its anchovies and bass for the fishermen, all our languages for all our students in all our schools. (121)

Stefano's account of his years working in the Velasco government (roughly, 1970-75), began with a challenge to show that anthropological expertise is good for something more than classroom pedagogy. This conjured my own memories of critical engagement with the Sandinista revolutionary government's relations with Black and indigenous peoples of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast—although from a position of minor importance compared with Stefano's central role—but with a comparable (perhaps fated) conviction that anthropology could indeed rise to that challenge. More broadly, I read his account as a troubling reflection on modernity's failed promise, taking its brighter days of humanist socialism as point of departure. I could not imagine a more eloquent illustration of L. P. Hartley's evocative phrase, "the past is a foreign country," than the scene Stefano sets in an inner sanctum of the Velasco Ministry of Agrarian Reform: gatherings of eminent Latin American

intellectuals, drawing exuberantly on Stafford Beer's pioneering cybernetic research to guide revolutionary transformations, and here I have to quote, "...rethinking the abacus of the dreams of indigenous peoples of the Peruvian Amazon," developing a model "...based on 'numeric simulation,' that would allow us to assign number values to all the variables that might intervene in the definition of the Native Community of the Amazon, and in determining a minimal and ideal way to recognize and deed lands..."

This structure of feeling, which shaped mid- and late 20th century confidence in modernity's revolutionary and liberatory potential, as necessary counterpoint to its horrors, is gone forever. Although deeply moving to me (because I experienced it once as well) this structure of feeling—would at best garner a bemused smile from Amalia and Sofia, our daughters: very little discernable relation to their radical dreams; a foreign country they might agree to visit, more out of deference than embodied desire. Yet while Stefano's most full-throated renunciation of modernity's promise comes in a different context, he troubles even a fleeting affirmation of the importance of that exuberant moment: with the help of some critical prodding from Richard Chase Smith, and from his Ashánika interlocutors, he had subjected his work in the Velasco government to "profound ethical questioning" long before the military put an end to what was left of his hopes for a modernist revolutionary Peru. Moreover, an even greater counterpoint to any temptation to bask in this moment of history-making comes from another instance of the book's feminist aspiration: the principal motif of those heady days, alongside Velasco's revolution, was Stefano falling in love, and Linda's (to quote again) uncanny ability to heal "my damaged persona."

Still, the allure and aura of a Latin American humanist socialism, though battered by the military governments of the 70s, lived on a few decades more, even limping into the 21st century. It was not just alive, but vibrant, in the Mexico of the late 1970s, making Stefano and Linda's move to Oaxaca a homecoming as much as an exile. If the visitation of Mario Vásquez in his University of San Marcos office first presented Stefano with the existential question—what is your anthropology really good for? —it was Guillermo Bonfil's warm welcome and

invitation to work with *Culturas Populares* that offered the opportunity to craft a full-fledged response. Here again there are so many levels on which to engage Stefano's narrative—which I read as his own self-reflexive and insightful version of “*así me nació la conciencia*”: the sparks of radicalizing influences in his otherwise petit-bourgeois upbringing; his life-defining choices; the blurred lines between liberal humanism and system-challenging radical praxis; and another homecoming of sorts, when he finds a welcoming space for activist anthropology not in the Anthropology department, but in the department of Native American Studies at Davis. Through all this, Stefano trains a sharp eye on the tensions and contradictions, which make any given choice or stance, however legitimate, at the same time partial and compromised. One such tension had special resonance for me, because it comes up constantly in my current job: an oscillation between deep admiration for rigorous, erudite, critical intellectual production, on the one hand, and disdain for the apolitical refusals that this quintessential academic performance so often entails, on the other. I love the anecdote of Stefano's stern French mentor, Professor Vellard, telling him: “Señor Varese, stop reading about the Campa Indians. You are too influenced by the writings of others. ... Go where they live, learn their language, stay with them as long as you can, and come back with books of notes and photos...”

I also appreciated Stefano's reappraisal of Gerald Weiss: he first read Weiss as an agent of U.S. cultural imperialism, but gradually came to respect him for the sheer brilliance of his ethnography of the Ashánika. More generally, so many of the extraordinary rewards of Stefano's life as an anthropologist rest on the foundation he laid, following Vellard's wise advice, which resulted in the iconic work, *La Sal de los Cerros*. And yet even before the ink on that book had dried, an “optimism of the will” took hold, leading Stefano to embark on a remarkable journey of political engagement, which left Vellard, Weiss, and so many others behind. These choices—that refusal to be rendered a spectator—made his life well-lived, and they inspire our deepest admiration.

The bus dropped me on the main street. I asked directions and, carrying my small bag, began to walk, sweating for all I was worth. In one night, I had come down from Oaxaca's central valley at 1,400 meters of altitude to coastal plains, savannahs, and tropical woods completely devastated by overgrazing, oil exploitation, and industrial incursion. I was now at sea level. Instead of the tropical landscape that the ancestors of the Olmec, Zoque, Mixe, Populca, Mayan, and even the later Nahuas must have seen many centuries before the Conqueror Hernán Cortés sent Pochteca merchants and occupying soldiers, now there was nothing left. Only suffocating heat magnified by a lack of trees, earth paved over with broken cement and asphalt, and puddles of water in suspicious colors and reflections.

I arrived soaked in sweat and depressed at the Unit's office, which also turned out to be the residence of a couple of young anthropologists. In the house's uncared for back yard there was a single immense tree, lone survivor of an ancient primary forest that must have existed two hundred years before. Right away the young anthropologist in charge of the office told me that tree "suffered" at night, that I shouldn't be alarmed because during the Revolution as many revolutionary men and women as federal soldiers had been hanged from its branches. That night, after taking a shower in a bathroom of precarious hygiene, I fell asleep hoping I wouldn't have visions of tree ghosts. The following morning, I awoke, both eyes swollen and infected.

"We forgot to tell you to shower with your eyes closed, because the water is contaminated with who knows what..." Welcome to Mexico's petroleum exploitation, where nature is assassinated and dollars flow to fiscal paradises right over there on the Caribbean islands on the other side of the Gulf. I was beginning to doubt my good luck, but as the Mexicans say, "*ni modo...* what's done is done."

I began reading all the Unit's documentation, going over the budget, analyzing the program carried out by the previous director, and finally calling Mexico City to request another researcher to be able to fulfill the proposed investigation and practical application with the Indigenous communities of the region, to which the Mexico City office had assigned me.

The Andean *Apus* or Mesoamerican *Nabuales* must have taken pity on me, because a few days later a woman arrived from the capital. She was around thirty, had an Italian look about her—she could have been one of my cousins from Piemonte—and spoke with the rich Córdoba accent of Argentina. This told me she was an Argentine political refugee who had survived her husband's extra-judicial assassination and a stretch of imprisonments and tortures before being rescued and seeking asylum at the Mexican Embassy. "Mexico, Mexico...so close to the United States...so far from God..." and yet so generously open to the thousands of political refugees fleeing the Fascist dictatorships of Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina, Chile, and one or

another lesser pseudo-dictatorship, all financed, sustained, and blessed by the co-governance of the United States and the multinational corporations. (184-186)

Activist anthropology, moreover, brought Stefano to a profound, life-changing embrace of what he calls the “cosmocentric” lifeways that he learned from the Asháninka, and later from the Zapotec of Oaxaca. I am grateful that he narrates his growing commitment to these groundings without getting too deeply into what, in current anthropology parlance, is known as the “ontological turn.” It is not just that Stefano’s introduction to this radically different way of viewing the world began decades earlier, but more fundamentally, because he affirms these groundings reflexively, as partial connections, rather than as a Copernican paradigm shift. In making this observation, I speculate that Stefano is following the lead of his Asháninka mentors who, in struggle against the noxious colonial oppressions that came with modernity, did not hesitate to appropriate its tools to advance their cause. Even if the 21st century maladies have given cosmocentrism a somber urgency for all humanity, even if it takes on much greater importance in Stefano’s later years, the image that his life-long narrative conveys to me is one of partial connections all the way down. Granted, there are moments when it appears to be otherwise: when the fox appears to bid Chaparro farewell; when Poshano accompanies him as a woodpecker; when he emerges shaken and transformed from a 9-day meditation-fast; when he reflects on insights gained from an arduous two days with the Plant Teacher. At these moments, I fancy hearing his faint plea to Maestro Gramsci, “Could you please release me from the “dialectic of my emotions?”, to which the Maestro responds with a gentle “no Señor Varese, better to learn to live with the contradictions.” Stefano carries us more powerfully—and in my use of the pronoun here, I refer to those of us who did not grow up with access to cosmocentric ways of being and knowing—he carries us more powerfully there because his thought process is so dialectical, so full of contradictory twists and turns, with increasing clarity and conviction, but no definitive arrival.

I associate Stefano’s journey toward a deepening affirmation of *cosmocentrismo*, with his astounding capacity to find fortitude in vulnerability. I

have no explanation for this intuition, beyond noting the inner peace that *cosmocentrismo* seems to bring him, combined with a sense that we need firm alternative groundings to resist the assumption that to reveal existential crises, painful episodes, ill-considered decisions, emotional turmoil, or ethical uncertainties and the like, is a sign of weakness best kept away from public view. The critique of toxic masculinities, a central motif of current times, begins here, with the inability of our society, and especially of men, to break down these protective walls, to do what Stefano has shown us is possible. I am still taking all this in, not quite sure where to start, in awe of the raw courage and depth of feeling that these passages in his narrative embody.

This, in turn, brings me to conclude with an expression of immense gratitude. Reading this book has reminded me of Stefano's deeply formative influence in five moments of my life, the first before we met, and the last still in the future. One of Stefano's early forays to advance a politically committed anthropology brought him into debate with a headstrong British anthropologist named David Mayberry-Lewis; surely this helped to soften Mayberry-Lewis up to be a more sympathetic reader, a decade later, of the activist inclinations of my senior honors thesis. In the early 1980s, we organized to bring Stefano to Stanford, to affirm the aspirations of our cohort to contest the apolitical groundings of our graduate training. Imagine being taught by a signatory of the iconic Declaration of Barbados! At UC Davis in the 1990s, Stefano, Linda, Andre, Carol and Rachel became our posse, and Stefano mentored my transition from revolutionary Nicaragua to neoliberal academia. In the early 2000s, a visit with Stefano and Linda in Oaxaca sowed the seeds of our engagement there; and Stefano gave us gentle encouragement, with his signature warm and self-reflexive humor, to partake in the "*reforma agraria pos-moderna*."

Finally, reading and reflecting on this book marks the beginning of a fifth moment of influence, and deep gratitude for lessons that, as they gradually manifest, will once again be life-changing: always choose what is right over what is comfortable or conventional; embrace and learn from the contradictions; give your love fully, clear through the joy to the hurt; confront the pain and find strength in telling difficult truths alongside the uplifting and pleasurable ones;

and always, always remain attentive—as Stefano closes this wonderful book—to the whisperings of the universe.