



Should one inhale?

Culture was Detroit...

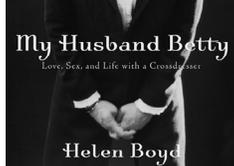
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Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists

DAVID L R HOUSTON, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

This column is going to close the year with a slightly different, even unorthodox perspective on books. Not a book review *per se*, it considers a specific title.

The book I want to talk about is *My Husband Betty: Love, Sex and Life with a Crossdresser*, by Helen Boyd. I met Helen Boyd by pure chance last year. She had copies of her book, and I quickly found myself drawn in to the story. Authoritative without pretense, matter-of-fact but not sterile, I saw an opportunity to engage students on a subject that was not easy due to its somewhat “foreign” nature. I knew few students would have encountered this subject and had a fair idea



My Husband Betty: Love, Sex and Life with a Crossdresser. Photo courtesy of Thunder's Mouth Press

of what their unblemished perspectives might be. This book would challenge them. Above all, the book was very real, very approachable—I’ll use it, I thought. I then offhandedly asked Helen if she might consider coming to talk to the class. To my surprise and delight, she agreed.

At its heart, *My Husband Betty* is not an ethnography in the usual sense. It is an account of how two lives intersect and how, through considerable effort, they manage to build a life together that is challenging, frustrating, rich and almost coincidentally speaks to much larger,

to see that the center of culture would be in Manhattan! Some discoveries are more surprising, however, like the production of a smokable version. The box, which appears to date to the early 1900s, notes that this Culture was “Super Quality,” but readers might be more surprised to see that in this case the origin of

more difficult issues common to many others. Being a crossdresser is not about covert trips to T J Maxx, or about invented reasons to add a copy of *Cosmopolitan* to a full shopping cart. It is about a journey into self, a trip that pushes boundaries in ways that can sometimes be unbearably painful, as Boyd demonstrates with the sad account of a good friend who clung to her marriage until it was painfully clear that it could no longer be. Being a crossdresser is a lot about love and self-respect.

Students soaked the book up like sponges. They reported their readings in an online blog and shared their respect and amazement at the stories and challenges faced by Helen, her husband Betty and the entire cast of the book. They were at first puzzled at how this practice can be, how grown men can want to do this and still be grown, and very often married, men. As the book deepened, as the critical analysis of her self, her life, her husband and the national support groups expanded, I could watch the students grow—it was almost palpable. They felt what the book’s characters felt. They did more than sympathize—they really *understood*.

Helen and Betty visited class as we finished the last chapter. I sensed a brief moment of surprise when they entered. Faced with the certain knowledge that, despite their deep reading, they were now going to have to talk—out loud—to these two people that had become like friends, some were a bit taken aback. Most had never actually met a crossdresser; few of them had any idea of how to behave, what pronoun to use, or if some questions might be out of bounds. This lasted only a moment. Then the conversation began. It was remarkable, really. It was almost as though Margaret Mead had walked in the door. Here before them was a living subject, a version of an ethnographer that *made sense*, and her real life was with her. Helen and Betty *spoke* to the students. Therein lies the real power of the book.

Too often, I think, we bring our assumptions about the accessibility of anthropology’s best work to our students. To those of us already versed in it all, this abstraction feels “natural.” Helen Boyd did for my students what several years of careful discussion had never done as well or as deeply: she *reached* them. Part of this was the book itself—engaging, funny, sad. Another, less obvious part was how the students could relate all of it to their own lives, their own struggles. “Normal” was turned upside down. “Abnormal” made perfect sense. We need more books like this one.

Please send any comments, suggestions, ideas for new columns or other material to David Houston at dlrh+an@uvm.edu.

Society for Linguistic Anthropology

MARK ALLEN PETERSON AND JOHN STANLAW, CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

The Chevy Nova sold well in its primary Latin American markets, Mexico and Venezuela,

exceeding Chevy’s expectations in the latter. This in complete contradistinction to the claim in hundreds of marketing textbooks and business seminars (and linguistics class lectures?) that in Spanish-speaking countries the Nova failed to sell because the name was understood as “*no va*”—“doesn’t go.” (For the straight dope on this bit of folklore, see www.snopes.com/business/misxlate/nova.asp)

Actually, linguists should always have been suspicious of this story. *Nova* is a perfectly acceptable Latin word with many Spanish derivations. *No va* is a semantically distinct unit. To assume confusion of the two implies that people would confuse the two, akin to assuming “English speakers would spurn a dinette set sold under the name *Notable* because nobody wants a dinette set that doesn’t include a table” as the folks at Snopes point out.

The power of this anecdote is that it makes it point so well in such a few words: the point that language that works in one context may signify differently in another. The problem is the underlying assumption that this is a matter of simple semantics. The real intersections between language and marketing are often much more complicated.

In Cairo, one debate was over whether to transliterate or transliterate. When McDonald’s first arrived, its primary target market was the cosmopolitan elites who could both afford the food and had experience of the restaurants elsewhere. Early menus and advertisements thus did not bother to translate the menu into Arabic—they simply transliterated the English names into Arabic phonemic equivalents. No one not already familiar with McDonald’s food could possibly get a clue as to what an item was made of from decoding the Arabic.

A tension developed within the company between those who wanted to expand into the supposedly rising middle class, and those who believed that in a country with a \$4000 GDP per capita and a 14 percent unemployment rate, the middle classes would never be a significant part of their market. As the former gained influence, translations of “happy meal,” “hot apple pie” and “value meal” appeared. It was never clear whether these efforts made any difference to sales.

If choosing transliteration over translation can be a rational marketing choice, it’s not always successful. In bringing Pokémon to major European and North American markets, Nintendo carefully translated many of the Japanese names into foreign language equivalents. For example, the fire-breathing lizard Hitokage became Charmander, a contraction of “salamander” and the verb “char.” In French, the same monster is Salameche; in German, Glumanda. The objective is to reduce what Malinowski called “the coefficient of weirdness” and increase the “coefficient of intelligibility”—without destroying the magic that appeals to young players.

When the Pokémon franchise came to Cairo, its owners simply transliterated the English



Shifters for sale: the success of this label in raising sales apparently depends on its ambiguity about just which president it refers to. Image courtesy Tom Bihn Co

names. The problem is that such names could mean anything. Rumors began to abound that the names were blasphemous. According to one flyer, what Charmander “really” means is “No God in the world.” Rumors like this fed into a moral panic that arose over Pokémon in some parts of the Middle East at the turn of the century.

Yet if semantic ambiguity can open the door to criticism, it can also sell products. Witness the case of the Tom Bihn company, based in Port Angeles, WA, which designs, manufactures and sells laptop bags, messenger bags, backpacks and briefcases. Inside some of the bags, the care label is printed in both English and French. The French version, though, contains something missing from the English version—the phrase “*Nous sommes desolés que notre président soit un idiot. Nous n’avons pas voté pour lui.*” (“We’re sorry our president is an idiot. We didn’t vote for him”).

According to the company, once someone noticed and posted the information to a blog, sales picked up. “It is a mystery, but since we launched the bags with the label sewn, sales have doubled,” company president Tom Bihn told *Agence France-Presse* last spring.

“Everyone seems to have a president that they think is an idiot. Take your pick: Jacques Chirac, Bill Clinton, George Bush.” In other words, the message has selling power because it is a shifter, a deictic element whose meaning shifts according to context.

Yet the label is clearly indexical in the more traditional sense as well. Bihn mentions Bush and Clinton as potential signifieds because the bags

were selling in the contemporary US. He mentions Chirac as a possible signified because the message is in French. Bihn has his own theory of meaning: he suggests that the joke was meant to refer to him, as president of the company.

None of these stories is as simple and direct as the Nova anecdote. Unlike the Nova story, though, they are true. Perhaps the moral for advertisers is a truism of anthropological linguistics: that meaning usually lies not in words but the contexts in which they are uttered.

Please send your comments, contributions, news and announcements to SLA contributing editors Jim Stanlaw at stanlaw@ilstu.edu or Mark Peterson at petersm2@muohio.edu.

Society for Medical Anthropology

NANCY VUCKOVIC AND JANELLE S TAYLOR,
CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Helman Receives SMA Career Achievement Award

An MD, Helman has worked to create and promote the subfield of clinically-applied medical anthropology through his teaching, his applied work and his numerous publications. Please see the “Rites of Passage” section of the April issue of *AN* [p 35], for the full description of Helman’s remarkable accomplishments.

Informed Consent in Oral History and Ethnography

By Mark Padilla and Amy Fairchild (Columbia U)

An October 1993 memorandum from the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP) in the Department for Health and Human Services (HHS) has been treated by many as having resolved a longstanding controversy over whether those conducting oral history studies must subject their work to institutional review board (IRB) review: “Oral history interviewing activities, in general, are not designed to contribute to generalizable knowledge and, therefore, do not involve research as defined by HHS regulations and do not need to be reviewed by an institution review board.”

Depending on the subject matter, oral history may represent very little risk of personal injury, embarrassment, or humiliation; it may, however, present tremendous risk. When the risks are great, explicit informed consent procedures are appropriate. But when the risks are negligible or realistically non-existent, elaborate procedures that emphasize remote hazards may prove counterproductive. Standard oral history methodology, as it is governed by copyright law, gives individual informants maximum control over their stories. But to champion the premise that oral history is not research, contributes little to “generalizable knowledge,” and merits little ethical or regulatory control suggests that it is somehow only marginally science. This perception is deepened by the informal advice that colleagues give to students and to one another as

they face the prospect of presenting their research to an IRB, “Just call it oral history. ...”



In contrast, ethnographic research—which includes, but is not limited to, qualitative interviewing techniques akin to oral history analysis—has become very contentious for IRBs, particularly in the context of applied public health research. IRBs often have concerns about precisely how informed consent will be obtained in situations involving observation of human behavior in natural settings, and are thus often reluctant to approve research protocols involving participant observation, despite the AAA’s argument that most ethnographic research involves minimal risk and qualifies for expedited review under category 7 of the OHRP Common Rule (Section 46.110). This has made the conduct of ethnography quite difficult in many settings in which applied medical anthropologists work today, and can occasionally require them to implement formal consent procedures in settings in which they are entirely inappropriate. The one-moment-in-time approach to formal consent procedures—while satisfying the contractual protections against litigation that motivate IRBs—also does not consider the continuous and dynamic nature of the relationship between “researcher” and “subject” in the context of extended ethnographic fieldwork. Ironically, then, it is not in the spirit of informed consent as a *dynamic and continuous process* and may actually undermine the ongoing flow of information about the ethics of research that is particularly important in ethnographic studies.

That we treat oral history and ethnography so differently underscores the extent to which the question of whether they constitute research or not misses the point entirely: we need to ask what type of ethical guidance and oversight is most appropriate for different types of investigations involving different levels of risk, and this needs to be achieved on a case-by-case basis rather than making blanket declarations that problematize particular research methodologies and exempt others out-of-hand. As in the 1970s, when epidemiologists argued that the rules of clinical research would render records-based research virtually impossible, we have again reached a juncture where we must face the limits of the principles and regulations designed for clinical and biomedical research as they are applied to the social sciences. The true question before us is how to weigh the harms to the research enterprise as a whole against those that might fall on individuals. To address this question appropriately may require reevaluation of the ethics that should govern different types of investigations and the place and nature of informed consent within those undertakings.

[For references and more information on this topic, see www.aaanet.org/press/an/index.htm.]

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