INTERVIEW

Lina Fruzzetti, anthropology as a way of giving back, por Filipa Lowndes Vicente

Análise Social, LVI (4.º), 2021 (n.º 241), pp. 788-813
https://doi.org/10.31447/AS00032573.2021241.09
ISSN ONLINE 2182-2999

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https://doi.org/10.31447/as00032573.2021241.09

SERIES: "IN THEIR OWN WORDS":

Lina Fruzzetti, anthropology as a way of giving back

by Filipa Lowndes Vicente

This interview with Lina Fruzzetti, a Brown University Professor at the anthropology department, is part of a series of interviews I did when I spent the academic year of 2016-17, in Providence (Rhode Island, USA): the first semester as a visiting scholar in the Department of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies (Michael Teague flad/Brown Visiting Professorship) and throughout the second semester working on several research and writing projects, all the while attending the countless activities on open offer at Brown. It was during this period that I had the privilege to meet and spend some time with the six women scholars I decided to interview and plan to publish at *Análise Social*: Areej Sabbagh-Khoury (Palestine), Ariella Azoulay (Israel), Leela Gandhi (India), Lina Fruzzetti (Eritrea/Italy), Meltem Toksoz (Turkey), and Vazira Zamindar (Pakistan).

What all these women had in common was that they came from places in the world far from the US and Europe. They came from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, and all had a reflexive and politicized relationship with the place where they were born in and resided for some part of their lives. Some had been in the US for many years, decades often, after going there to study a first degree – Lina Fruzzetti from Sudan when still a teenager, and Vazira Zamindar from Pakistan. Meltem Toksoz had lived in the US for years, earned her doctorate there, but then returned to Turkey. Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, a Palestinian, and the youngest of the six, had just arrived at Brown in 2016 for a post-doctoral fellowship. Others, like Ariella Azoulay and Leela Gandhi, had

already studied and taught elsewhere in the world and in the US, before being appointed by Brown as part of a recent university policy to hire exceptional academic women.

All of them impressed me for their intellectual and academic work, as well as for their activism and engagement with the different worlds they related to. Several of them came from places where conflicts have been raging for decades and had made this their object of study and critical reflection – Palestine-Israel, India-Pakistan, for example. All of them challenged both the past and the present with difficult questions and none of them had followed a straightforward academic path. They all exemplify how work and life are one and the same and how one can (and should) be both an academic and a citizen. They all defied the comfort of the idyllic and artificial life at an Ivy League university campus, where one can so easily forget about the outside world, and opted for "restless" paths and interests instead. And, of course, they were all women, in an American context in which Donald Trump's recent victory, on 8 November 2016, reminded us daily of how gender and racial equality, social justice, and the universality of citizenship had to be constantly cared for, protected, and affirmed. The renowned African American civil rights activist Angela Davis reminded the audience, at a conference she gave at Brown University around the same time I did these interviews, that "freedom is a constant struggle" (the title of her 2015 book, and the first one of Davis' books ever to be translated and published in Portugal, in 2020).[1]

Paradoxically, or maybe not, many of the issues and events we discussed in 2017 remain just as relevant today – four years later: Trump is no longer in power but many of his devotees are. Erdogan is still in ruling; the conflicts and tensions between India and Pakistan only intensified with the "Hindu India" idealized by Narendra Modi and have now been aggravated by the Pakistani support of Taliban's control of Afghanistan; and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues, pressing as ever before.

Since these interviews were done in the form of a colloquial conversation, rather than with the scientific legitimacy of a predefined script, I chose to "withdraw" from the text as the person asking the questions, listening, and guiding the conversation. The interviews were transformed into direct speech, in which the different themes were edited and divided into sub-chapters, and

1 Angela Davis, 10 February 2017, conference titled "Freedom is a constant struggle", Salomon Center for Teaching's DeCiccio Family Auditorium at Brown University; Angela Davies, *A Liberdade é uma Luta Constante. Ferguson, a Palestina e as Bases de um Movimento*, translation by Tânia Ganho, preface by Cornel West, edited and with an introduction by Frank Barat (Lisbon, Antígona, 2020).

then revised by the interviewed, at the moment of publication. Hence the name I gave to this series – "In their own words".[2]

LINA FRUZZETTI: THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS

Ariella Aisha Azoulay's interview was the first to be published in *Análise Social*, in 2020, shortly after the publication of her book *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism*.[3] I am glad to publish, in this issue of *Análise Social*, the second interview of this series – Lina Fruzzetti's. Of the six women I interviewed, Fruzzetti was the only one that had been at Brown for decades – since 1975 – and the first black woman to have tenure in the social sciences at the Ivy-League University, not a short venture in a country that is still dealing with serious racial discrimination in all spheres, including the higher education level.

Fruzzetti was also the only one of the six scholars I had already met before 2016. Thanks to her friendship with fellow anthropologist Rosa Maria Perez – a Portuguese professor based in Lisbon, with wide international experience in teaching and research abroad, mainly Brown and different universities in India – Fruzzetti had been to Lisbon several times. For many years they taught courses together, at ISCTE, Brown and at the Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar, while also publishing together (their book on women's experiences of ethnographic work in India came out by Routledge in 2021). I think it was in 2007 that I met her for the first time in one of her trips to Lisbon. She and her husband, Ákos Östör, also an anthropologist, had organized an exhibition in Lisbon that really impressed me. It was held at the National Museum of Ethnology [Museu Nacional de Etnologia], then directed by Joaquim Pais de Brito, and it was titled *Singing Paintings – art and performance of Naya women* [*Pinturas Cantadas – Arte e Performance das Mulheres de Naya*] and I remember thinking at the time that it was one of the best exhibitions I had ever seen – for the ways in which it made me think differently about things I knew while making me think about many things for the first time ever.

The women of Naya were a group of contemporary Indians who, living on the edge of survival and unemployed, decided to organize a cooperative where they shared the profits obtained by their individual work. And what was their work? To paint the subjects about which they sang. They appropriated an old

2 I thank José Manuel Sobral, the journal editor when I presented the project in 2019, and Marta Castelo Branco, the editorial assistant, for their interest in this project and for the support in transcribing the interviews.

3 "Ariella Aïsha Azoulay – Unlearning, an interview with Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, by Filipa Lowndes Vicente". *Análise Social*, Vol. LV (2.º), n. 235, 2020, pp. 417-436.

south Indian tradition – the singing pictures – that consisted of painting stories on a paper scroll and then going from village to village singing the story, while slowly opening the painted scroll. As they learned this disused practice, these Muslim women also transformed the subjects of the performative objects: next to the traditional stories of Ramayana or the Mahabharata, classical Hindu narratives, they added contemporary themes, in a dialogue with their present that could always allow for new subjects. They could be more local or more global, from the conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, to the September 11th New York attacks. Women's issues were also especially present – from female education to contraception, HIV prevention or the condemnation of femicide.

This 2007 exhibition was paradigmatic of the transformations that were going on at the time in the humanities, with results in theoretical academic production, but also in exhibition and museum practices: it was centered in artistic/material production beyond the so called western world; it gave visibility to a group of women who belonged to the lowest marginalized Muslims groups, poor, illiterate and socially subaltern, thus especially invisible and voiceless; it combined local and global questions; it went beyond the objects themselves – what would have been an aesthetically centered display – to explore the wider contexts of their social, political, cultural, religious production; and it addressed different gender issues: on the one hand, there was a female appropriation of a forgotten male tradition; on the other hand, this inversion had a double impact in gender relations within the community. First, it empowered the women, who dedicated time and energy to the practice while prompting their physical mobility into other villages and making them the main family breadwinners. This empowerment, however, was not well accepted by all husbands, who were threatened by their wives' new economic power and independence. Lina Fruzzetti later told me a specific story that well illustrated how some women were penalized for their emancipation. Some of them travelled to Brown at the invitation of Lina and Ákos. When one of them returned to India the husband was no longer at home and was willing to make her life difficult.

I was especially attracted by the holistic approach with which Lina and Ákos dealt with the "singing pictures", something that "anthropology" enabled, and "history" or "art history" would not have been able to achieve. Exhibition/film/catalogue/art sale: the paintings/objects themselves in the exhibition; their singing voices in the film also on display; their life stories told by themselves to the anthropologist couple and transformed into words that could be read in the catalogue; and the art sale in the museum, after the closing of the exhibition, where all the profits went to the women's cooperative. The museum became the space for viewing, reading, listening – the women's voices finally heard and read – but also for purchasing the artwork, a gesture

that subverted the noncommercial identity of the institution while transforming it into an Indian market.

I read the catalogue from cover to end, so fascinating were the first-person narratives of the women of Naya – "their own words". Only now do I wonder if this has, unconsciously, influenced my own way of transforming these interviews – Lina Fruzzetti's and the other's – into first-person narratives. What I never told Lina is that I also read the whole catalogue to my eldest daughter Maria, who was 5 at the time, as she was so enveloped in Ayesha, Guljan, Hazra, Jaba, Jamuna, Karuna, Lutfa, Manimala, Mayna, Meena, Radha, Rani, Rukmini, Snehalata and Swarna' lives and words as I was.

My second contact with Lina's work was equally touching and arresting. Again, one of those experiences that change the way you somehow look and think of things. November 30th 2016, 5pm, the film "In My Mother's House", by Lina Fruzzetti and Ákos Östör, was screening for the first time at Brown, where I was teaching that semester. "The film follows Fruzzetti on her decade-long quest to understand a family divided against the backdrop of colonial rule, war, emigration and the global world we live in today" is the sentence that summarizes one of the strongest films I have ever seen. Fruzzetti's itinerary through the places and persons of her past, trying to join the photographs of a family album that will never be wholly completed. Eritrea and Italy, linked through colonial ties when Lina was born, are also the places from where she comes from. Lina shares with us her emotions, her search, the silenced family secrets and sorrows, but also the family reconciliation that only time and age could enable. And the black and white photograph – her mother (Lucia) with Lina and her brother (Andrea) – that prompts the personal quest and the documentary itself. Her mother, the beginning of it all, appears in the film, alive and speaking, but unfortunately no longer living to attend its first public screening. My own mother had died the year before I saw the film, in 2015, and because of that, but not only because of that, I cried throughout most of the film tears of sadness and joy.

Lina, Lucia and Andrea. Photograph taken for visas purposes.

"In My Mother's House" – Lina Fruzzetti's personal life story entangled with the main features of 20th century history – is inspiring and rich, emotionally and intellectually, in a way that seldom comes from the core of academia. Lina Fruzzetti, together with Ákos, her creative companion and husband, have demonstrated the infinite possibilities of learning, researching, teaching, and producing. Fruzzetti combines a lifelong of teaching with the curiosity and creativity, the knowledge and sensitivity, to travel outside and inside: both through the multiple geographies in which she did her fieldwork, from India to Africa, and in the richness of her interior life, one she was able to mirror in all her books, films and exhibitions.

FILMS

1995. *Seed and Earth*. This is a film about the life of working rural men and women. The film follows the schedule of how men and women farmers divide the work according to gender specific roles.

2000. *Khalfan and Zanzibar*. A 27-minute film on the handicapped people of Zanzibar, TZ. Khalfan is the first to establish an association of handicapped people in Africa.

2001. *Fishers of Dar*. A film about the fishermen and women of downtown Dar es Salaam. The film explores the continuity and integrity of traditional practices in new, contemporary, settings.

2005. *Singing Pictures: Women Painters of Naya*. The Chitrakars women in Naya learn the art of painting and compose songs about the subjects depicted in the paintings. Stories range from Hindu gods and goddesses to Muslim fakirs as well as social issues of domestic violence, bride burning or to the current issues at hand. Scroll paintings and songs have become popular in India and abroad.

2009. *Songs of a Sorrowful Man*. Life of Dukhusyham, a well-known mystic, teacher and composer of songs in Naya. He encouraged women in Naya to learn the art of scroll painting and begin to earn a living.

2017. *In My Mother's House*. The film's subject is the life of an Eritrean woman, spanning four continents, crossing three colonial rules and six decades, covering her youth during Italian colonial rule and the annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia, the migration to Sudan, and finally her return home to a free liberated Eritrea. Her life experiences, accomplishments, and her scattered family are central to the film. How does Lucia, Lina Fruzzetti's mother, and her experience inform us about global connections?

PUBLICATIONS: A SELECTION

1982. *The Gift of a Virgin: Analysis of Women, Marriage, Ritual and Kinship in Bengali Society*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press.

1982. *Concepts of Person: Kinship, Marriage, and Caste in India*, ed. A. Ostor, L. Fruzzetti, and S. Barnett, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

1984. *Ritual and Kinship in Bengal*, Lina Fruzzetti and Akos Ostor, New Delh, South Asia Publishers.

1989. *Culture and Change Along the Blue Nile: Courts, Markets, and Strategies for Development*, by Lina M. Fruzzetti and Akos Ostor, Colorado, Westview Press.

1993. *The Gift of a Virgin: Analysis of Women, Marriage, Ritual and Kinship in Bengali Society*, new introduction (27 pages), 3rd reprint, India, Oxford University Press.

1998. *Women, Orphans, and Poverty: Social Movements and Ideologies of Work in India*. Quebec, World Heritage Press.

2002. With Rosa Maria Perez, "The gender of the Nation: allegoric feminity and women's status in Bengal and Goa". *In* R. M. Perez and C. Carvalho (ed.), *Mirrors of Empire*. Oeiras, Celta Editora, pp. 41-58.

2003. *Women, Orphans, and Poverty: Social Movements and Ideologies of Work in India*. Quebec, World Heritage Press.

2003. *Calcutta Conversation,* L. Fruzzetti & A. Ostor, New Delhi, DC Chronicle Books.

2005. *Culture, Power, and Agency: Gender in Indian Ethnography*, L. Fruzzetti & S. Tenhunen (eds.), Calcutta, Stree.

2006. "Women, culture and the feminized nation: the woman's question". *In* M. Ruckenstein and M.-L. Karttunen (eds.), *On Foreign Ground: Essays on the Importance of Barely Perceptible Structural Codes,* Finnish Literature Society, Studia Fennica Antropologic (New Series).

2013. *When Marriages go Astray: Choices Made, Choices Challenged*, New Delhi, *Orient Blacksawn*.

Lina Fruzzetti: anthropology as a way of giving back

BORN IN BETWEEN: ERITREAN AND ITALIAN

I lost my father when I was three and a half, he was Italian and my mother was Eritrean. She was only eighteen or just about nineteen when she became a widow, with me and my brother. She had to take care of these two kids who were half-Italian in a country that was, at the time, beginning to be hostile to the presence of the Italians in Eritrea. And then the civil war had broken, so she decided, in hindsight, that Eritrea was not a good place for her to raise her children and she took us to Sudan, which was totally different: an Arab Muslim country. She decided that was the best place for me and my brother to grow up and go to school, and she was lucky in that along the way she always had people who sort of came forward to help her, and these were people who knew my father.

BOARDING SCHOOL IN SUDAN

We were put in boarding schools, a British/Italian boarding school called Sisters' School, run by Italian and Irish nuns, one of the best schools in North Africa at the time, in Sudan. When you think about all this, the efforts of this woman, it sort of begins to impact on you, you begin to realize: "I would not have been where I am had it not been for the way this woman thought".

I was in a school with very privileged kids, most of them were children of Greek expatriates or of British colonial officers, the daughters of shipping magnates or prime ministers. I was studying with this high elite kind of class of people, but I knew, class wise, these were not my people. Me and my brother were scholarship kids in that school. We did not have to pay anything and everything we had was given to us, as for example, second-hand clothes.

It was a small class of seven people that graduated in my year, only seven, most of them got married. Marriage was the thing to do immediately when a girl finished high school, but I remember my mother saying 'no, you will not get married, there must be something more to study'. Here is again, a woman who could not read and write and would use her thumb to sign on papers and so on, but marriage would not be the life for her children.

When I was finishing my studies at the boarding school, I honestly had no idea what I was going to do but there was one particular person, her name was Enrica, Sister Enrica, who saw something in me that I did not know. This

woman took me aside one day and said, 'when you finish, I don't want you to be married like everybody else, I think you should go and study', and I said 'what do you mean study? Isn't this the end of it?'. 'No', she said, 'there is college and there is a fellowship now and I think I am going to put your name to it', I said 'what do I have to do? I do not think my mom can pay anything', so they came up with the money for the airfare, they bought me clothing and I was sent to Chicago to study, and they just gave me the fellowship.

[Later, I went back to get married in the Sudan. In the same school that I went to. All the nuns came to the wedding and it was really funny to see all these white habits, you know, like they wear over there. The sister that was really good to me was also there. Then from Khartoum I went straight to India.]

"YOU SHOULD GO AND STUDY MORE": A SCHOLARSHIP TO THE US

That was the first time I left home on my own, on an airplane. I went from Khartoum to Rome, Rome-London, London-New York, New York-Chicago, all on my own. And I was met at the airport by the college administrators, the school I went to was a Dominican college. The American person who gave me the scholarship was then working in the State Department in Khartoum, she was an American woman, who had gone to this college and she offered me the fellowship to study, I mean it was all luck, if I hadn't had luck…

In that college, I met one nun who also took good care and looked after me, becaming my mentor. After I finished my BA degree course, she said 'now you do graduate work', and that is how I continued, never complained about further studying. I have always been advised by good teachers, that is why I spend so much time today advising others, not just in my department, anybody, people who just come and say 'I heard you can help me' and I would make the time to talk with them, I would remind them 'I want you to remember that I did all this for you but you need to repay back for somebody else'.

Recently, I got an honorary degree from Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois, where I did my first degree. The last week of April [2017], I received a letter from Dominican University, saying, 'we want to give you an honorary degree". I went and thirty of my classmates were there. They told me 'we always knew there was something different about you', I said 'explain to me, because I cannot remember anything, I was so sad always, because I missed home and for years I did not go anywhere, I just sat in that school', they replied 'oh, you were funny, but we knew that that was not the end' and they were really amazed that I did what I did and it was just nice, it was very good to be there, sharing those moments of my past.

I know they weren't too happy with the speech I gave when receiving the honorary degree. But, you know, as you get older you decide you do not have the luxury of constantly being polite. Politeness is actually unethical, because you do not say the things you should be saying. Or you coat them in a rosy color, and that is not doing myself or others a favor. Particularly, I am not doing the generation that comes after me a favor. They have to be able to articulate their thoughts clearly and honestly. And I did exactly that. My classmates said 'God, Lina, I did not know you were so unhappy, that you had all these problems', I replied 'what do you mean?', they said 'well, I never thought of you as colored, I always thought of you as one of us' and I said 'what are you talking about?'. 'When I walked with you in the street and the nuns would say 'do not go out today because there is a demonstration, you should not go out because you will get in trouble, you will be sent back home if you demonstrate with the blacks', I said 'but, when I go out and people throw stones at me or something' - in parts of Chicago they did that, in the western part - I said 'what do I do? Should I just say 'go ahead, do it?' I have to react'. That is really weird. I could not participate in the demonstrations because they told me that if I did, they would send me back home, they would take away your visa. "You are not a citizen, and the demonstrations should not concern you".

A MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN A HINDU TOWN: STUDYING MARGINALITY IN INDIA

I then studied in Chicago, and you can ask me 'why India?'. It was really by accident, I met Ákos Östör, and Ákos was studying India, otherwise I was preparing to do work in Africa and I did not know anything about India. We married in 1967 and we went to India, for his doctorate research, while I had just finished my undergraduate college education. In India I began to research on Indian Bengali Muslims in a small Hindu town that had a ten percent Muslim population. Somehow, I decided I wanted to understand what it means to be marginal.

Now, obviously, being a woman, being concerned about women, and being concerned about the issue of marginality was always in the back of my mind. In Sudan I was a marginal person, I was not a Muslim, and I am not an Arab. They attempted to convert us, they used to call us names for not being Muslims and so on, it made me understand what it means to be on the edges of society. In India I studied the Muslims and wanted to understand from their side what it meant to be a minority, which I had experienced in a Muslim country as a refugee. I began to be concerned about issues of identity from an early age. That became the subject for my Master's degree at the University of Chicago

and later on I changed my topic to study the construction of women in a Bengali society.

I realized, irrespective of the question of marginality, that women, within the larger Hindu society, were on the margins. By that I mean they lacked a voice, but I know, for example, that Eritrean women living in the refugee camp were stronger and could express themselves. I saw those powerful Eritrean women coming forward and demanding change, but that was not the case among the women that I was working with in the rural parts of west Bengal. My concern with questions of identity, marginality, but also questions of women, began to take focus, and become my primary focus in life, and later on, my research focus got translated into issues of race and discrimination in the USA. How, and why, I did what I did? It becomes clear that you don't think about why you take this or that step, but there was some driving force behind my choices and selections of paths I undertook. I began to think of myself as a person that can confront all the changes I want to undertake because my mother taught me this. If she could do it why couldn't I do the same? She was always ahead of me. If I failed, I was not failing for people here in this country or any other country, but I would be failing her.

India is still very central to what I do now, it has really framed me, and it has framed my way of thinking. But now I am using the information and the knowledge I have learned from India in my understanding of the United States. I am now preparing a one day conference on the question of how we come to terms with the idea of the sacred when we deal with popular culture. I am bringing only two people to talk about this, one from Oxford, one from SOAS in London. They will discuss a theme from their own work, but then I ask three of the graduate students who work on India, and one who works on Kashmir, to see how the two different generations think about these issues, especially on coming to terms with Islam and Hinduism in the everyday. And this idea really emerges from a film I've directed and produced with Ákos Ostor, called 'Singing Pictures' and the other one is 'Songs of a Sorrowful Man'.

Lina and Akos. Photograph by David MacDougall.

SINGING PICTURES: A DOCUMENTARY ON THE PAINTERS-POETS OF NAYA (INDIA)

The Muslim women that are the protagonists of this documentary kept saying 'we don't know how long we have to continue painting because', one of them said, 'the Hindus don't like what we are doing, they resent our popularity too, and they don't accept that what we paint is about Hindu mythologies. On the other hand the more conservative Muslims dislike us for our work having to paint Hindu gods and goddesses; they want nothing to do with us, they won't help us if we get into trouble, in a communal kind of setting'.

And so here is this group that is doubly marginalized – by the dominant Hindu community and by the conservative Muslim community. They're like in a no-man zone. But they can teach the world, they can teach India, they can teach so much about what it is they are doing. These are an illiterate group of women but their painting and the words they use, the vision they have, is amazing, and it is such a gem that I hope they do not force them to stop painting. Two or three stopped painting already, about two or three years ago, because they could not put up with the pressure and I worry about them. It is the husbands who are pushing them to stop, resented by their popularity. But these men have very short minds because when the women stop the income stops, they are the only ones generating income, because the men are not providing them with alternative jobs. And the ones who stopped painting are now wearing the hijab, and some have taken up religious studies. Their way of life is changing, even if a few of these women painters might prefer the change.

Shorno Chitrakar next to her scrolls

SEED AND EARTH: VISUALIZING THE WRITTEN WORDS

Seed and Earth was done in the late eighties. That film came out of years of field work that both Ákos and I have completed and published and it was only after publishing four or five books, that we asked ourselves 'how can we visualize the words in a text into a documentary'. What we did was to film a day in the life of a man and a woman, by focusing on two families. Ákos first did his part with somebody from Harvard, he did the shooting of the agricultural cycles. I went back soon after he finished, in that same summer and shot a film on the women, more on the private life within the household, from morning to night. The film *Seed and Earth* is one of the most successful of the twelve or so that we have produced and directed together. It has won amazing, amazing prizes.

It is a simple documentary, it does not have pretension, the 'seed' being maleness and the 'earth' being femaleness, and this is what we researched and wrote about in our books on kinship and ritual, or kinship and the construction of person. But to visualize it, to see a woman getting up, what she does, she cooks, she bathes, she comes back in the afternoon, how does she spend the afternoon, she talks about anything from the price of tomatoes to land being usurped, from the local river flooding their lands to the works of corrupt politicians. And I say 'here is this amazing person we do not think much about – a village woman –, and yet they are aware of their world, they know exactly what is going on within and outside their village. And then we talk about what happens to their daughters when they get married, and one of them talks about how the in-laws of her daughter are abusing and maltreating her, they are pressuring her for more money, more dowry money. And these stories repeat themselves.

Knowing the language and having studied similar communities, I could direct the cinematographer when to start shooting despite the absence of actions or so-called interesting visuals. *Seed and Earth* has two or three parts that, because I know the language and I know the topic, I insisted that those parts be in the film and I would tell the Harvard cinematographer doing the actual filming, 'OK, turn on the camera right now, because this is a very important part', he says 'what? they're just sitting, gossiping', and I said 'but it's their gossip that is more important', and that is how we covered that part when the old lady was bemoaning the pain of her daughter she had just come from visiting. I am not sure if the women would have brought up the conversation, especially talking about the abuse that the daughter was going through. People who saw the film always comment on this section, and they tend to find that little section really interesting.

Once you live in a community for so long you notice this minute things. I have been doing field work there since 1967 as an undergraduate and then I went back to do my doctoral work, and on and on, from that first encounter to the very last book which is on violence and domestic abuse, and discrimination against the child girl. I went from looking at the woman as a goddess to now, thirty years later, looking at the same sort of concept of woman and asking other questions – why is there so much violence at the same time? What is the cause of it?

The second question I wanted to weave into the book was on the new marriages that were taking place between Hindus and Muslims, and what these marriages were causing to society. I went back again to the topic that I started with in 1967. You would think that now the two societies would be closer and united. Unfortunately that is not the case. The Muslims, who were very much part of the Bengali social community and were participating in each other's festivities, now they distance themselves. You could not recognize who was a Muslim and who was a Hindu unless you saw the signs, now the Muslim women are wearing their veil because they want to separate themselves and assert themselves as Muslims. Therefore, instead of having solved the difficult issues, they have become central to how they publicly distinguish themselves. It is not about questions of ignorance, they know what they're doing, and they understand the consequences.

When I visit the village or the towns where I did years of research, I see some of the families that I have worked with. I do it all the time. In a way you just open doors but you never close them. I went to the same Muslim communities. I will tell you an example of these changes: I was very close to one of the families in this community, we bought our vegetables from the grandfather of this family, and they all lived in the same neighborhood. One day Ákos and I went to their home and I said 'well, I'll go and say 'hi' to the women' and the son told me 'You can go but he cannot go', I said 'what?! he's like an elder brother to them', and he answered 'yeah, but now we are observing different rules of conduct, separating women from men and the women now cover themselves'. Ákos was so upset by that, he was really upset, and the son said 'you know, we are under a lot of pressure, please do not take this personally, this is how it is'. So, I began to understand the pressure.

In the last 25 years we have been taking photographs and doing little bits of video of different people of the town of Vishnupur. Now we are working on the documentary film depicting some of the changes, visualizing the social history of the town, and we will finish it in the next few years.

AFRICA AS OBJECT OF RESEARCH

If you look at the work that I have done so far, there was a time when I was really interested to go back again to Africa and undertake research there. But it was very difficult for me to work in Sudan, where I grew up, and the difficulty had to do with being a strong outspoken woman. As a woman, you do face some challenges in that society. I had to address the pressure imposed on women. I refused to abide by the code of conduct (I had to wear a veil and so on), and I just said 'no, I am not going to do any of this', but I was able to do some work and since I speak the language, I succeeded in completing at least one project. The issues in the Horn of Africa, in particular, are the focus of my interest. Even though I have not been able to go back and continue some of the work in Sudan, I keep up my scholarly works through secondary material.

I spent two years of attempted research work in Tanzania, on the fishing communities, and on the status of disability. Additionally, I did some teaching at the university of Dar es Salaam, in Tanzania. Being in a Muslim based country, my focus there was understanding how Islam developed and how Islam is framed within the national discourses of Tanzania. Here I was not dealing exactly with the question of marginality, but with how Islam was beginning to be increasingly central to the national narrative and how people were reacting to the changes. I think that what I am also interested in are those tensions created by forces that are unable to come together.

Those tensions and their forces are very central to Eritrea, for example. Half the country is Christian, and the other half is Muslim. Families did and continue to intermarry, and they celebrate each other's religious festivals. There were no publicly demonstrated tensions, particularly all Eritreans, irrespective of religious differences, shared a similar nationalism, they all participated in the liberation of the country. "Eritrea" stood as a shared symbol to them. Of course tensions can erupt but, so far, the population has been aware of what might transpire if religion was to become a disrupting force. So far it has been calm. The highlands are all Christian, so there is less of that tension there, in their everyday discourse, but if you go to the lowlands bordering Sudan, that can erupt into clashes and of course that begins to be a concern now – the ties between the Christians and Muslims are peaceful and I hope it doesn't flare up and become the cause for splitting the country. I think we are smart enough to see that a lot of this pressure is also coming from outside.

I will tell you another episode that happened in Eritrea, not in this trip but the one before that, three, four years ago.[4] I had gone to a town called Keren,

4 The interview took place in June 2017 three days after Lina Fruzzetti returned from Eritrea.

where I always go and where I was born. My mother always went to the same vegetable seller, so I went to say 'hey, how are you!', I extended my hand and he says 'sister, I cannot shake hands with you', I said 'what do you mean?! Your hands are not dirty. Don't worry about it', 'No, no', he said 'No, now you see, sister, you should cover yourself', I said 'cover myself? I have always come like that…', he said 'Yes, but now we have to keep distance, we have taken a more conservative view and we are trying to exemplify a true Islamic way of life and I cannot be dealing with you like that, as you are a "*horma*", you are a woman', and he went on and on and I just said 'it's OK, I don't even need vegetables today'. And that was the end of my relationship with this family. I was just shocked. Really, really shocked. More than shocked, a bit upset that it happened to me in the city of my birth, wondering 'what is the final outcome of all this?'. As an Eritrean, it pained me and I left the market convincing myself that it was just one individual incidence, it did not define the country. It is coming totally from somewhere else, not locally. But you can understand their lives. I am there for a day or two, they live there.

Something similar happened in India, in the village I studied. A man told me 'You know, we cannot be as friendly as we used to be, times are different, I have daughters I have to marry. And I have to marry them to good conservative families. My relationship with you will not make this possible unless I too observed purdah'. I could sit and argue with him about this illogic, but I can also totally understand. The question of marginality comes up again and again.

"I AM THE SUBJECT OF THE RESEARCH": BEING A BLACK WOMAN IN THE US, BEING A BLACK ACADEMIC AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

With such a strong sense of understanding of my world and how I play a role in it, I began to take a conscious interest in work and in teaching that always brought these three or four central questions into focus for me: who am I? I am a woman, but I am also a person of color in this country. When I came to this country, I did not think about issues of color because I used to say 'what do you mean I am black? I belong to a particular tribe of my mother' and they said 'well, tribe doesn't make sense here'. However, I began to have to think about issues of color because no matter how you think of yourself, you are also what others see in you, in the eyes of people when you step out of the house, you are a person of color.

Being a person of color became very central in whatever I did, and I became very sensitive to it. The question of gender comes out also very clear to me, on account of me being a woman, but also in relation to my mother's work. Later

on, she became very active in the liberation of Eritrea, she became actively involved in the movement, she would fund money and our house was open to all these fighters who needed a place to heal and rest. Therefore, even though I didn't know anything about Eritrea except what people in the Diaspora talked about, questions of nationalism and patriotism suddenly became my focus.

Coming to the topic of gender and issues of identity, brings to focus the question as to who are we in this society? Or in this university? How does the university want to frame or identify me as a person? Am I going to just be a woman anthropologist? Am I going to be a black woman anthropologist? Or am I going to be the black woman anthropologist who works on international issues?

I become something or someone that is needed from time to time in the eyes of the university, and so I get assigned accordingly in many committees, and at times I would ask, saying: 'excuse me, why am I on this committee? Is it because of color, or gender, or what?'. My questions can embarrass people sometimes because they do not say it, but you know exactly what is going on, and you play the game accordingly. Sometimes you get put on a committee and you think it is just a number and a color and a gender, but it's OK if you are quiet but speak your mind. But of course, they realize I am not going to be quiet; they do not realize who they really choose for the job. And so, I begin to challenge them about certain things not because I was looking for an argument but I'm trying to just say: 'OK, you put me here because you know it's necessary, but now pay attention to what it means that it is necessary, to have a person address these issues for you, with you and for you'.

I try to understand people who say that I should not worry about racism or discrimination, in that I am at Brown, and the campus is protecting me. But I am not protected from these issues. They still bother me every day. I get up and I have to think, before leaving my home, I should be aware of where I am and how to react to unpleasant behavior and to remember not to be blind to the fact that I am different here, and if you don't make yourself aware people will bring the difference to you in one way or the other. So always be ready to the ways you are going to face it, how you are going to judge it, how you are going to deal with it. So how can I react to that? There are two ways. One is to ignore it and one is to be the educator. But you know what? I can fight it, but I am getting tired of fighting, and I am just so tired of being the educator, of being the victim and the educator. That is exactly what is happening. Find other people, non-blacks to do the educational part.

In the social sciences I was the first black woman to receive tenure at Brown, in 1982, and the first one to be given full professorship. I remember talking to the provost then, I said 'how many black women before me got tenure?' he

said, 'you are the first one', I replied 'that is a shame, that is a shame. I should not be the first, there should be many more before me. I am sure great women came to Brown and I knew some of them, but they left. They left because they just could not take it', the academic space lacked something for them.

Things have not really gotten much better. This issue of 'inclusion and diversity' that we have now, it is more apparent, or more theoretical, there was no such thing or such ideas twenty or thirty years ago. I heard about the class of 1969 – I was not there but I was told – the students walked out demanding an increase in the number of minority students.

I came straight from the University of Minnesota here to work. I had just completed my PhD and despite the fact that I had other opportunities, I accepted Brown's offer. I loved the campus, my visit here was in May and everywhere was covered in yellow flowers, so I just accepted the offer and did not negotiate the salary. A school in the Boston area had offered me a job similar to the Brown offer but with more money. I did not know how to negotiate, nobody taught me, and I just left it. During my teaching tenure at Brown, two or three times along my career, I had the opportunity to consider leaving for other job offers. But I stuck it out, and opted to stay at Brown. Primarily, I think, because of the students who are different, they are actually academically committed, smart, and not afraid to engage in discussions. They are animated, creative, in fact those who apply to Brown share some fundamental ideals and values towards a common good.

Brown students are amazing, for some of us faculty, we remain committed to them. I have always kept the students central to my life at Brown. I worked always on behalf of students or, at times, to other people who felt they were ignored. I promised myself that one day, I will write, obviously, about my experiences at Brown. It was not all always rosy but I met a few great administrators and faculty who made a difference in my life. Therefore, when people say 'wow, you must have it great', I say 'how do you come to think that way?'

Yes, I notice some changes, but I also notice a lot of backlashes. Especially when we had Ruth Simmons as the president of Brown, an African American woman. Everybody said, 'oh you guys (meaning black faculty) have it good now because you have a black person…'. Far from it, we did not receive any special treatment, it is sad when we are judged wrongly.

But, you know, when you stand up in a class to give a talk or a lecture, I don't distinguish how I do it, easier or less easy. If I were to teach a course on race, which I do from time to time, I tell them 'This is the one class where you can say anything you want and forget the fact that I am not white, you can say anything you want about people of color'. This is the time we sit together and talk it over and see why we say the things we say and where does it come

from, this knowledge, where do we get this knowledge from. Let us open up the discussion about race and know that I will not be hurt if you say you hate me, it's alright. But I just want you to know that I cannot be on one side or the other side, I am a person who is, literally, half and half. My father was as white as milk and my mother was dark. Of course, some people find it very difficult to speak, and some people would then complain and say 'I could not speak up because I was afraid', but I make the space for them to speak up, so if you do not ask a question I cannot help you. To be different and to stand there today and teach a course, believe me, it is not easy, and it never used to be. Now you have to really think about how you are going to start a conversation about race.

Now I hear whites saying that if they have black people in their class, they need to be careful how they say what they have to say. I say, 'that is interesting, what is it that you want to say that you are so afraid?'. When I give a lecture I never, for example, would stand up and say I hate all white people. That would be stupid. My husband is white and my father was one; my kids, my grandkids are whiter looking. But what I am careful about is the political issues that people bring: 'so what do you think of Trump?', 'I want to talk about Trump, but what is your feeling about him?'. Questions about Trump, questions about Islam, they bring it up and they say 'we know they are all rapists and they are all this and that…', I reply that accusing people does not help the situation. 'I'm afraid to say something', and 'yes, if someone gets up and says in class that blacks are half intelligent, I would be afraid too because I would have to defend the negative attacks on blacks.

Any University campus is never calm, at Brown we find that both the president and the provost are really trying very hard to address issues that afflicts the community and constantly attempt to raise constructive group discussions about diversity issues. Unfortunately, I find the concept of diversity to be insipid because it precisely incorporates diverse hosts of ideas, from skin color, birth origin, issues of disability, to mention a few. Instead, what I am interested in is to get at the heart of the issue which is questions of *race,* most importantly the state of the underrepresented marginalized communities, but not the all-inclusive *diversity* which tends to minimize the fight for equality and representation.

When I came to Brown there was the Louise Lamphere case. You know the Louise Lamphere class action suit? Louise Lamphere was a faculty member in the Anthropology department in the early seventies, she was denied tenure and she sued the University. The class action suit on sexual discrimination was a big case, it went national, and eventually she did win the case. I joined the department of anthropology a few years before the final decision of the court, but Brown did hire the expected additional percentage of women faculty.

If you look at the numbers of the newly hired women faculty then, I would add that most of them were white women. I do not recall a plea made for minority women to be included amongst the new hires. To my understanding the class action suit did not mention race in particular, except a question of gender. When the Lamphere court case is ever discussed in public, I would remind people that the class action suit did help women but, it did not change nor help the paucity of women faculty of color. When I came to Brown [in the mid-1970s] there were about 22 black faculty, the numbers dwindled but the current provost Richard M. Locke has truly made an effort and now I actually do see more people who look like me. What Brown needs to address is to make sure faculty of color stay. Despite the working conditions one moves ahead, and, since I came to Brown, I chaired more than twenty-three graduate students' committees and I try to advance their academic progress and not allow the difficulties of work to affect my endeavor.

Now I focus very much on my grandchildren's future choices. I work with them because I want to know their grades, their class standing and more and they say 'Lina, I am only a sophomore', I don't care, I would respond, I do want to know how they are performing. And now [2017] I am working with the little one, Suraya, 'I want to know the grades, Suraya', and she replies 'Lina, I did OK, don't worry'. She is coming here for a week in the summer, to take pre college summer courses at Brown University, it cost an arm and a leg but I think this will be good for her. I am more concerned about her because she looks more like me than the other five grand-children. I just say 'you have to tell me everything', you know, 'you will experience things….'. When Barack Obama won, she called me, early morning, and she said 'Lina, this is good or bad?', I said 'This is very good' and she replied 'so, I should be happy?', she was four years old or five, I said 'yes, you should be happy'. She said 'I am so happy! I'm going to write him a letter', so she wrote him a letter and he responded to her. She wrote 'My name is Suraya, I am six years old. I am so happy that you are the President, please help the poor people'.

IN MY MOTHER'S HOUSE: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DOCUMENTARY

It was very hard for me to do that documentary, very hard. I imagine I will never be able to close it. I am thinking of writing a book about the making of the documentary, the ups and downs, the pain and joy of meeting relatives and making new friends. We received a Carnegie Grant to start the work and began to collect what were people's commentary and criticism on the film – from the cities and countries were the film was showed – and why certain comments

were raised and not others, and what might have been the meaning of some of the comments.

The film was screened at Brown twice, and both times we received multiple questions different from other times. I also privately showed it to family and friends when I was in Eritrea, and the younger generation reacted so totally different from the older generation. The older generation were watching the film talking and commenting about the film while the film was going on, and they were chided by the younger generation asking 'Stop talking! Look what she is saying, this woman'. The documentary gave them a kind of pride that they felt was absent amongst their cohort.

Therefore, Ákos and I decided to write a book on what it meant to do such an auto-biographical film, what I or others got out of it. I will have to go to Sudan, there are still a few people living who knew my mother very well, good friends of hers, a few refugees who never left Sudan. However, as I told you, it is kind of hard for me to go to Sudan. I have to figure out a way how to interview my mother's friends about their time together. I would use either English, Tigrinya or Arabic, but with them I now use mostly Arabic because that has become the language that is easily used to communicate.

Once, I drove about seven hours to a town near the Sudanese border and I met one of my mom's friends and we chatted together about the time we spent in Sudan. She was totally shocked that I found her, it took a long time to find her, but I told her that I would come back, and we would have a longer conversation. I gave her some money because she was all alone, she does not have children. When I left her, it was late at night, and she began to cry. I told her: 'I will take care of things, I'll send you money along the way', then she said 'do you know you're doing what your mother did? And you did it exactly the way she would do it, she would never want you to know what she gave you'.

A lot of people who knew my mother would reiterate the same words, even a lawyer, who was my mother's lawyer. He asked me for a copy of the DVD, because he wanted people to see it and understand what a woman refugee in Sudan was able to accomplish. He was referring to people who fought for the liberation of Eritrea. Lucia, my mom, took care of many who were injured and had to receive medical treatment. Her house (then bordering Ethiopia) was available for them. My mother took care of many soldiers who were hurt and had to leave the battlefield, and come to Sudan for refuge. Of course, I was unaware of what took place in my mother's life. But I was told that the Eritrean state had given my mother a certificate for all her good work with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). That certificate is still hanging in her house.

GOING BACK TO ERITREA IN THE AFTERMATH OF COLONIAL INDEPENDENCE: 1991

My mother lived in Sudan, in Khartoum until 1991, when Eritrea got independence. In 1991, our then Brown university president Vartan Gregorian, told me 'I think you should go home – to Eritrea – and take a week off', I said 'in the middle of the semester?', he said 'take a week off, go home, and report to me what you see'. He gave me the money, and I flew. I did not know Eritrea, I left when I was four, five, I did not know much about the country. But when the plane landed, most of the people on the flight were coming back after a long time. They went mad, screaming and crying, it was like a catharsis, and when the plane landed, they dashed out and they were all kissing the ground. We were met by women dressed in white, in their national dress. They welcomed us with open arms and hugged us, offered us coffee and water. I too found myself like all others, hysterical. I was screaming and crying, I could not control myself. It was really strange.

And people were so helpful. I did not know where my uncle (mother's brother) was, I knew I had one uncle who never left Eritrea. Before leaving America, I did call my mother saying, 'I am going home, you should come from Khartoum and visit while I am there'. In the morning I took a taxi and told the driver 'Take me to the main street', I tried to find the oldest shop, I entered and I said 'I just arrived from America, I don't know where my family is, I left Eritrea when I was five', and the man said me, 'OK, what do you remember?', I said 'I remember a lot of smell, there was this smelly area, fish maybe…'. He then left the shop and took me to the fish market, and he found an old man who looked at me and asked 'so, who is your uncle?', and I told him who it is, and in total disbelief he asked me about my mother, he said 'are you the daughter of Lucia Tesba?' and when I answered 'Yes!', he said 'Come'. He closed the shop and took me to

Lina offering money collected from selling *Fishers of Dar* DVD, to the chief of Kikomboni village.

my uncle's house, which was not far from there, and I said 'Uncle Berhane, I am Lina, Lucia's daughter', and he told me 'go away, stop bothering me. Who are you? Get out'. I said 'uncle Berhane, please…', then when I started to talk to him, who I really was and so on, he fainted, he just fainted, he could not believe that. The country had just gotten independence, a lot of confusion and euphoria, but eventually my uncle sat me down and he would not let me go. He said 'I want to get you out of the hotel, you can stay here, we have to reach your mother, she has to come', two or three days later, she came from Sudan and we did spend time together but soon after I had to return back to the US to teach. But my mother met her two brothers that she had not seen for almost thirty-five years. What my mother managed to do was to send all uncle Berhane's kids to Sweden. My mother would go to the refugee camps to take them away to her house and she took care of them and eventually sent them to Sweden or to Germany, two European countries who took in refugees from Eritrea. At the inception of the civil war in Eritrea from the early seventies, many of the Eritrean youth left their homeland seeking refuge in Sudan and eventually moving on to settle down in one of a few European countries.

The Italians who came to Damazin (Ad-Damazin), in Sudan, to start construction on the second largest dams in Africa (the biggest is the Aswan in Egypt) sought someone who could assist them. My mother who spoke both Italian and Arabic and could cook, was hired by them to run their daily meals and at times could interpret to them, that is the reason why my mother moved to Damazin from Khartoum. The Italians after twenty years completed building the dam. My mother worked for them, they did help her while they were in Damazin, but her restaurant remained open even after the departure of those engineers. She made a bit of money and she was able to purchase land, build a house or two and rent them, and build a second restaurant. Her bar next to the restaurant was shut down but she turned it into a pastry place. But she made a lot, a lot of money, and I recall when the bank manager had to convince her to put her money in the bank and she said, 'I don't trust you'. Along with the commissioner of the police together they said 'Lucia we really need cash, cashflow to operate in the bank' and to convince her they added, 'you can deposit the bags of cash in the bank and if you want it in the next day, we will give it to you'. Cases of money from under the beds were taken out, and deposited in the bank. The next day my mother got up early, called the driver and said, 'I am going to go and get it' and he said 'OK, mama'. And the money was there in its original bags waiting for her. The bank manager said, 'I knew you would come, here are the bags', and she said 'oh, OK then, keep it in the bank'. From her businesses she knew exactly how much money was coming in every day and if I was visiting her, I would try to help her using a calculator, and I would

redo the sum two, three times. She would tell me 'Lina, you should have this figure', she would tell me how much, I would be surprised how close or accurate her figures were.

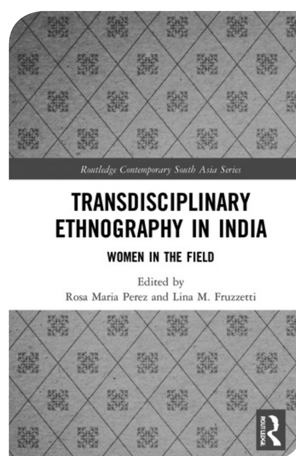
When she went back to independent Eritrea in 1991, she sold all her businesses in Sudan. We told her she did not need to work anymore. She had her house, a brand-new house she paid for it in cash. She was doing alright. She did not need to work anymore.

CURRENT PROJECTS: TEACHING AND WRITING

I teach courses now that I really feel very close and attached to teaching. I am doing a course on cinema, the birth of cinema and the birth of anthropology. Additionally, I teach a course on what is anthropology today, how the discipline has changed a lot, where I ask why we still call it anthropology. I run a seminar for upper-level students on development, where I focus on gender and development, and finally I also teach ethnographic research methods. But sometimes I agree to support a student on an independent course on topics that I too am interested.

Rosa Maria Perez and I just edited a book on the experiences of being women anthropologists doing field work in India.[5] The differences between being a woman or a man in the field is stark. For example, I know it was different for me to do field work at the same time when Ákos was doing field work – both of us sharing the town. Here I was with this guy, and people were always more interested in what he was doing than what I was doing.

Initially it was difficult for me to start my research or get accepted in Bengali households for an introduction because they could not understand who I really was. They did not believe that I was not Indian. There was a rumor in the town that I was the daughter of a well to do Brahmin, but I ran away with this white guy and come to hide in this little Indian village. But then, when others found out I was from Africa they were a bit skeptical – 'why do I want to talk to you…'. And then some others – Hindus – knew I studied the Muslims, so they didn't want me in their house. Very often it was my funny



5 *Transdisciplinary Ethnography in India. Women in the Field*, ed. by Rosa Maria Perez and Lina M. Fruzzetti (London, Routledge, 2021).

personality that changed their attitude towards me. Then they would call me and ask, 'why don't you come and interview us?', I said 'because I finished!'. 'We have more to tell you, it would be the new pull to doing more research'.

This book is a very self-reflective book, about when women do field work and their delivery of specific difficulties and how do they deal with these difficulties. In my chapter I explained what it meant for me, at times, to be there with our two kids who were with me in the field, while Ákos was in Benares. Being a woman or being a mother in the field is different from a man's experience. I think that it is harder for women than it is for men because you cannot just get up and leave. There are all the daily chores of the house, even though you have a nanny you still have to manage. But in the end, we all approach our difficulties and manage to care for the family and do complete our research.

Interviewed by Filipa Lowndes Vicente
in June 2017, edited between
2020 and 2021.

VICENTE, F. L., FRUZZETTI, L. (2021), *Interview* "'In their own words': academic women in a global world. Interview 2: Lina Fruzzetti, anthropology as a way of giving back". *Análise Social*, 241, LVI (4.º), pp. 788-813.

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