



Leila Guerriero, courtesy Ediciones Universidad Diego Portales.

Leila Guerriero and the Uncertain Narrator

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Abstract: In 2010, Leila Guerriero won the Premio Fundación Nuevo Periodismo, one of the most coveted literary journalism awards in Latin America, for her story “El rastro en los huesos” (Trace in the bones). This accolade consolidated her reputation as a master of the *crónica* (chronicle). Guerriero’s first book, *Los Suicidas del fin del mundo* (The suicides of the end of the world), was published in 2005. Her second, *Una historia sencilla* (A simple story), appeared eight years later. *Plano americano* (Three-quarter shot), a collection of Guerriero’s profiles, was also published in 2013. Nobel Prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa wrote that Guerriero produced “precious object[s], crafted and written with the persuasion, originality and elegance of a short story or a successfully realized poem.” This paper analyzes some of these “objects,” focusing on Guerriero’s journalistic narrator.

Introduction

The last piece of fiction that Argentinian Leila Guerriero (born in 1967) wrote was, paradoxically, the one that began her career in literary journalism.

[The story was] “Kilómetro cero” or “Ruta cero,” I don’t remember. . . . It took place in a car. It was the story of a young man and woman who had a very intense relationship and were on the run after robbing a bank. . . . It was written in third person, in a very sparse tone, very much in the style that became my way of writing years later. It was the last piece of fiction I ever wrote, but it got me in the door at *Página/12*.¹

In an autobiographical text from 2001, “Me gusta ser mujer . . . y odio a las histéricas,” or “I like to be a woman . . . and I hate hysterical women,”² Guerriero wrote that she placed a copy of her story inside an envelope and dropped it off at the reception desk of Buenos Aires daily *Página/12*, addressed as per the doorman’s suggestion to Jorge Lanata, the paper’s director.³

Two weeks later her father woke her up, screaming from the other end of the telephone line. The story had been published on the back cover, where authors of the stature of “Juan Gelman and Osvaldo Soriano used to sign with their bylines. . . . Three or four months later, and without knowing who I was, the man [Lanata] offered me a job at *Página/30*, the monthly magazine of the newspaper.”

In 2006, Guerriero revised these events in “Sobre algunas mentiras del periodismo” (“About a few lies in journalism”).⁴ The new version of her autobiographical narrative contains two factual differences from the first one: in the second version it was “four days later” that the short story was published in *Página/12*, as opposed to “two weeks later”; and Guerriero was offered the position at *Página/30* “six months later,” as opposed to “three or four months later.”

The discrepancies are minimal, and have no major impact on the journalist’s personal story. They could easily be interpreted as mistakes or memory lapses. But since Guerriero has a reputation for inquisitive research, fact-checking skills, and precise writing, the fact that she has left these discrepancies intact in her collection *Frutos extraños*, where both stories coexist close to each other, invites a deeper level of insight.

As manifested by the laxity with which she has treated even her own autobiographical narratives, Guerriero strives to take her writing beyond the notion of factual precision. In her stories, doubt exists not as something to be overcome, ignored, avoided, or corrected, but rather as an essential element of truth itself, to be added to complete the whole of the experience.

Mathematical Precision?

In a May 2013 column in Spanish newspaper *El País de Madrid*, Peruvian Nobel Prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa’s words had an immediate canonizing effect on the works of Guerriero. The article discussed her anthology of journalistic profiles, *Plano americano* (Universidad Diego Portales, 2013):

In our world [Latin America], journalism is the realm of spontaneity and imprecision, but the [journalism] that Guerriero practices is on par with the one practiced by the best writers of the *New Yorker*, establishing an equivalent level of excellence: meaning rigorous work, exhaustive research, and a style of mathematical precision.⁵

What strikes one as bewildering about Vargas Llosa’s description (other than the overgeneralizations) is that Guerriero, who was awarded the New Journalism prize awarded by the Gabriel García Márquez foundation in 2010, and in 2013 won the González-Ruano award for literary journalism, cultivates precisely the opposite effect: a deliberate imprecision is a central as-

pect of her style. While her investigative rigor is never in question, and clearly is part of her research process (she refers to this in several interviews—most recently in a Q&A with writer Ramón Lobo for online magazine *Jotdown*), it is not the meticulousness of her research that makes her work stand out, but her ability to keep this meticulousness from inoculating her works against doubt and uncertainty.⁶ This openness to a story's vulnerability makes her achievement outstanding in a field focused obsessively on locking down the empirical and delivering the certain.

In fact, as Guerriero's work makes apparent, intense reporting often renders the exact opposite of mathematical precision and quantifiable fact: the more a reporter learns about a story, the more she becomes aware of all the nuances, dark areas, and, ultimately, the unknowable elements that are part of the whole. To applaud Guerriero for being a disciplined reporter is to deny the other, subversive half of her journalistic method: her inclusion of doubt, and her use of voice and opinion as connectors between facts. Guerriero deftly maneuvers this difficult balance of elements in order to create an immersive experience for her readers—an emulsion of facts and observation that slowly seeps into the readers' perception of the story, until *their* point of view reaches a protean point of truth.

There are three main mechanisms that Guerriero uses in her pieces, which play off of the presence of doubt and multiplicity: the *uncertain* narrator, who acknowledges that, the more she tries to get to the bottom of a story, to the bare-bone facts, the more questions appear; a series of *contradictory sources*, who go back and forth in their renditions of a certain event or story, or cancel each other out in a zero sum game of factuality; and a *negative storyline* that forms not by the accumulation of corroborating facts, but by the exposure of a system of contradictory ones. The purpose of these mechanisms is to construct a fragile, momentary microcosm of truth that grows from within the interstices, at the interplay between the most detailed factuality and an overwhelming doubt; a type of phenomenological reality as a form of *journalistic truth*. Just like Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "objects," defined at the intersection of multiple perceptual instances, Guerriero's journalism pivots between the confidence in the factuality of the present moment and the multiple openings that future instances of perception may present to the observer:

I say that I perceive correctly when my body has a precise hold on the spectacle, but that does not mean that my hold is ever all-embracing; it would be so only if I had succeeded in reducing to a state of articulate perception all the inner and outer horizons of the object, which is in principle impossible. In experiencing a perceived truth, I assume that the concordance so far experienced would hold for a more detailed observation; I place my

confidence in the world. Perceiving is pinning one's faith, at a stroke, in a whole future of experiences, and doing so in a present which never strictly guarantees the future; it is placing one's belief in a world. It is this opening upon a world which makes possible perceptual truth and the actual effecting of a *Wahr-Nehmung*, thus enabling us to "cross out" the previous illusion and regard it as null and void.⁷

The Uncertain Narrator

Guerriero's profile of monumental Chilean poet Nicanor Parra opens with a series of similes that immediately shatter the myth, fragmenting the main character into a series of possibilities:

He is a man, but it could be anything: a catastrophe, a roar, the wind . . .

He is a man, but he could be a dragon, the rumbling of a volcano, the stiffness that precedes an earthquake. He stands up. Squeezes a woolen cap and says:

—Go ahead, go ahead.

Reaching the house where Nicanor Parra lives, on Lincoln Street in Las Cruces, a coastal town two hundred kilometers from Santiago de Chile, is easy. The hard part is reaching him . . .

Nicanor. Nicanor Parra. Born in 1914, he is 97. There are people who think he is not among the living.⁸

All these "possible" Parras are not only introduced as an attempt to open up the multiplicity of the poet's personality before the reader. This broken image of Parra stems from the narrator's emotional response to the myth, and the myth's splintering effect on the reportorial voice.

Sarah Foster, the translator of Guerriero's profile of Parra into English for the *Paris Review*, decided to discard the similes in her version of the encounter. The English text that appears in the *Paris Review* starts with: "Reaching the house where Nicanor Parra lives, on Lincoln Street in Las Cruces," avoiding the comparisons that open the original in Spanish.⁹

Examples of this splintered, phenomenological narrator abound in Guerriero's journalism. But one of the most interesting ones appears in her latest long-form work, *Una historia sencilla (A simple story)*. The book follows dancer Rodolfo González Alcántara to a prestigious, but relatively unknown, folkloric dance competition that takes place every year in the small town of Laborde, in the province of Córdoba, Argentina. González Alcántara is a professional *malambo* dancer, and the first time Guerriero sees him, the man is onstage:

Then I hear, coming from the stage, the strumming of a guitar. There's something in that strum—something like an animal, tense and raring to pounce as it prowls near the ground—which grabs my attention. So I turn around and I run, bent low, to crouch behind the jury's table.

That is the first time I see Rodolfo González Alcántara.

And what I see leaves me speechless. . . .

There he was—Rodolfo González Alcántara, twenty-eight years old from La Pampa, man of towering stature—and there was I, sitting on the lawn, speechless. . . .

That Friday night, Rodolfo González Alcántara reached the center of the stage like an evil wind or a puma, like a deer, or a soul stealer, and stayed nailed to the ground for two or three beats, his furrowed brow staring at something nobody could see He was the countryside, the dry soil, he was the tense horizon of the Pampas, the smell of horses, he was the sounds of the summer sky, he was the buzzing of solitude, he was the fury, he was sickness and he was war, he was the opposite of peace. He was the knife and the gash. He was the cannibal. He was a curse. When he finished, he stomped on the wood with the strength of a monster, and stayed there, looking through layers of crumbly night air, covered in stars, all glint. And, smirking from the side—like a prince, or a pimp, or a devil—he touched the wing of his hat. And he left.

And that was that.

I don't know whether they cheered him or not. *I don't remember.* . . .

What I did later? *I know because I took down these notes.* I ran backstage but, although I tried to spot him in the crowd—a huge man, touched by a hat, with a red poncho tied to his waist: it wasn't hard—he wasn't there. Until, at the open door of one of the green rooms, I saw a very short man, no taller than four-foot nine, no jacket, no vest, no top hat. I recognized him because he was panting. He was alone. I got closer. I asked him where he was from. . . .

He was shaking—his hands were shaking and his legs were shaking, his fingers were shaking when he stroked the beard that barely covered his chin—and I asked his name. — Rodolfo González Alcántara.¹⁰

Guerriero—who has, admittedly, no expertise in or knowledge of the dance of *malambo*—is amazed by what she sees, and can only respond with an explosion of metaphors. She describes González Alcántara in much the style she used with Parra. This time, however, between the two versions of

her character (the man onstage and the man backstage), there's a clear lapse not just of time but of reliability, a perceptual void that forces the narrator back to her notes: "I don't know whether they cheered him or not. I don't remember. . . . What I did later? I know because I took down these notes." These notes, the *facts* that Guerriero hangs on to as a reporter, don't deliver what's important about her first encounter with González Alcántara. They simply keep the reporting in motion, and the emotions in check. Notes are just a connector.

"Our memory is a machine that helps us edit and choose between the information that is completely necessary and the information that is additional," Guerriero told me during an interview we had in November 2013. "Our memory is more useful to cherry-pick certain facts than to remember everything. Otherwise we would all be 'Funes the Memorious' [the main character of Borges's eponymous short story]."

Contradictory Sources

Guerriero writes most of her profiles for *Plano americano* in the third person, but, rather than attaining the clinical assertiveness of the narrators of *New Yorker* narrative nonfiction, her reporting reaches points in which contradictions are the only possible conclusions. Some stories even begin from a point of instability. An example is the opening to Aurora Venturini's profile, a piece that Guerriero wrote for *Sábado* magazine (which was republished in *Gatopardo* magazine in 2012):

Aurora Venturini's father was a member of the Radical Party, in the thirties, he was arrested for political reasons and transferred to Ushuaia prison, from which he never returned.

Aurora Venturini's father was a radical militant who was sent by his own party to work at the prison in the city of Ushuaia, something he did successfully.

Aurora Venturini's father was a radical militant who was sent by his own party to work at the prison in the city of Ushuaia, but after learning that his eldest daughter had joined the Peronist party, he returned to La Plata, where he was born, just to throw her out of his house and go back.

The father of Aurora Venturini was fond of horse racing and, after gambling everything he had, he left the city of La Plata, where he was born, but when he learned that his eldest daughter had joined the Peronist party, he returned, only to throw her out of his house and leave, once again.

Aurora Venturini's father disappeared from his home in the city of La Plata, where he was from, an undetermined day of an unspecified year, and never

returned.

Aurora Venturini's father was named John.

Aurora Venturini's father has no name.

Aurora Venturini has no father: she has *versions*.¹¹

The profile of this Argentine octogenarian writer, unlikely winner in 2007 of the Premio Nueva Novela (New Novel Prize, an award for “young voices in literature”), opens with the same life developing simultaneously in the parallel universes of memory. The narrator, unsure about the facts, opens up this uncertainty before the reader. The effect imbues Venturini with a multifaceted, complex character.

“But don't we all have versions of our father [instead of *a* father]?” I asked Guerriero during our interview.

“Yes, but you can have versions that are more or less extreme,” she answered. “You can have versions that your memory involuntarily mixes up: ‘four’ versus ‘two weeks later’; or ‘three months later’ versus ‘six months later’ [the reference is to her own autobiographical narratives in *Frutos extraños*]. In these cases, the result is pretty much the same. [But] in the case of Aurora [Venturini], the changes are extreme, because she reinvents her own legend depending on . . . who knows what! . . . her need to recreate herself as a character, to distance herself from her literature or her past.”

In the profile, Guerriero describes Venturini's unreliability—as a source and as autobiographer—as part of the novelist's persona. Since this instability will lie at the root of Venturini's narratives, the contradictory nature of the novelist's biography stays unquestioned by Guerriero and buttresses the profile. In a sense, by featuring Venturini's unassailability, voluntary displacements, concealments, and adjustments, Guerriero prioritizes *truth* over *fact*. What the narrative loses in reliability, it gains in credibility.

There's a woman I admire, a journalist, Larissa MacFarquhar,” Guerriero told me. “She writes for the *New Yorker*, and she reflected a lot on profiles. I always felt connected to what she said, because I feel the same. She says that she doesn't like to ask hostile questions . . . and that she is always more interested in the legend that the person decided to tell us about him/herself.”

When the self-invented novelist outweighs the mere *facts* about Venturini's life, journalism stops. “My job ends there,” Guerriero told me. “I'm not a biographer, or a historian.” Her responsibility, she believes, remains with the truth that grows in between testimonies and facts, neither one, nor the other.

Although many of Guerriero's profiles and chronicles resort to conflicting sources, there are other interesting ways in which she applies uncertainty

to her texts, enhancing the complexity of her characters and challenging the reader to take a new approach to the theme and ideas that may have been canonized and stabilized by past narratives about them.

The Slippery Story

The longest of the profiles in Guerriero's *Plano americano* is of Roberto Arlt, an Argentine novelist and playwright who died in 1942. Arlt's biographers all describe the man as elusive, but an episode surrounding a photo of Arlt's wake summarizes the problems Guerriero encountered. The following excerpt is long but necessary to understanding the journalist's dilemma.

In 1991, Ricardo Piglia published in "Primer Plano" a pullout of newspaper *Página/12*, a text titled: "Arlt: a cadaver over the city," which would reappear as a prologue to Arlt's complete short stories, published by Seix Barral in 1996. In that text, Piglia wrote: "One afternoon Juan C. Martini Real showed me a series of photos of the wake of Roberto Arlt. The most impressive one was a shot of the coffin hanging from ropes in the air, suspended over the city. The coffin had been assembled in his [Arlt's] room, but they had to get him out through the window with gears and pulleys because Arlt was too big of a guy to pass through the corridor. That casket suspended over Buenos Aires is a good image of the place Arlt's literature has in Argentina. He died at forty-two, he will always be young and we will always be pulling his body out through the window. . . . Arlt is the most contemporary of our writers. His body still lingers over the city. The pulleys and ropes that hold him are a fraction of the machines and strange inventions that propel his fiction into the future." *It was never totally clear whether the story was a perfect metaphor or whether the photo really existed.*

—What was all that about the photo of the coffin? [Guerriero asked Piglia]

—Look, everybody tells me it wasn't like that, that the pulleys and the coffin thing never happened, but I will tell you how this came about [Piglia answered]. Martini Real worked by that time at Corregidor, a publishing house, and he was editing Onetti's *La muerte y la niña*. It happened there and he had photos, and among those photos he showed me one and said: "Look, a photo of Arlt's wake." And you could see the coffin lowered by pulleys. It would be great to find that photo he showed me.¹²

Although it wasn't clear for Guerriero whether the photo existed or not, or whether the episode had taken place, the photo [or its myth] was part of Arlt's persona as a writer. What Guerriero did with her profile was date the origins of the myth, and offer a few possible explanations for it.¹³ Arlt's story also illuminates a totally different aspect of Guerriero's narrative. When she contacted Martini Real's daughter by e-mail, the woman revealed: ". . . I couldn't find that one. When my dad passed away, I spent a lot of time look-

ing through all his materials, to check what he had, and save the important things, but I don't remember having seen the photo you mention."¹⁴

Guerriero then quoted another interview, this time with poet and long-time Arlt friend, Conrado Nalé Roxlo, published in 1968 by writer Omar Borré: "Arlt wasn't a very tall man, but his voice, his way of standing, and perhaps his coffin, hanging from a crane because it couldn't be taken down through the spiral staircase, maybe all that gave the impression that he was very corpulent."¹⁵

Mirta Arlt, Roberto's daughter, was also consulted by Guerriero: "I don't remember anybody telling me that they had to take him like that. But it may be true, because he was a massive man." *The clues that were lost, which are being lost.*¹⁶

The sources don't come to an agreement, and the factual aspect of Arlt's death is inconclusive. That would not be an option for a biographer, Guerriero told me, but it is perfect for a journalist. Guerriero uses memory, perception, and facts combined to create a much more nuanced image of the character. Was Arlt a huge man? Was his coffin hauled using a crane? Did the photo exist? These questions help to understand the dimension of the myth around Arlt, and offer the reader an image as uncertain and unassailable as Arlt's himself.

"There was a pattern in Arlt's life," Guerriero told me during our interview, "and that was his need to erase his tracks. That was his pattern, and I believe that a text is successful when you can unveil those patterns and work with them." In the "erasures," Guerriero finds what she calls "a symptom of truth"—that larger truth of Arlt as a writer, and the fact that he was already "working for his posterity since the first time he wrote something."

Is it easier to figure out someone living or someone dead, writer Alan Pauls asked Guerriero in a recent interview for *In* magazine:

In principle, someone dead. Their life is over; the meaning of their story is closed. But all lives are equally enigmatic. Someone living can tell you whatever they want, they can lie to you, etc. That's why the book of profiles is called *Plano americano* (Three-quarter Shot). The best you can do is to approach people from the perspective of a three-quarter shot. You can never get a close-up shot of anyone, not even if you spent a year with them. How do you know they're not hiding letters from a love affair with a twelve-year-old? Maybe you'll find out later, after they die. It's not just a small detail: it's something that radically changes someone's story.¹⁷

The distance between perception, fact, and memory is malleable. But that substance is what fills the void, the remaining quarter of the three-quarter shot. These elusive elements appear in Guerriero's narrative in certain lines

of dialogue and are always geared toward multiplying the possibilities of the *real*, opening up new questions. It is the hidden quarter of the image—what remains outside its frame—that triggers and multiplies the appeal in Guerriero's characters. Like Roland Barthes's erotic photographers, Guerriero's narrators leave out of frame the most lurid aspects of the truth.

Conclusion: Thick Subjectivity

Guerriero named her first anthology *Frutos extraños* (Strange fruit), like the song by Billie Holiday, a discarnate rendition of Lewis Alan's poem about the lynching of an African American man in the South of the United States. Alan's song, Holiday's version, and Guerriero's stories all work as encasings, preserving historical narratives like fossilized insects inside Baltic amber. These encasings, however, don't all work the same way. During our interview, Guerriero told me that the patterns she found in each story were precisely what inspired the structure, the substance, and the themes in her writing. Her reporting helped her find that structure. In that fashion, form and content were always entwined, interconnected. "Arlt's story was about erasures," said Guerriero, "so those erasures needed to be a component of the profile if I wanted to tell it right."

Riddled with uncertainty, Guerriero's stories find room for observation and voice in the interstices of doubt. Like mortar holding together the bricks of a building, Guerriero pours her voice and impressions in the gaps between the larger factual blocks of the story. And these observations not only hold together the structure like grout. They also give it its final shape. Guerriero's narrative voice doesn't feel imposed or external. It doesn't shine a light on facts, or offer itself in the ways that David Eason has called "ethnographic realism." The uncertain narrator doesn't reveal the story "out there." But it doesn't "construct reality" either. It isn't, in Eason's terms, a "cultural phenomenologist." This type of narrator is embedded in the stories, holding them together from within, showing their failure to adhere to a stabilized reality through an agglutination of observations and facts. This type of narrator surges from the depths of each story in the form of what I will call a *thick subjectivity*, borrowing the term from Clifford Geertz¹⁸: "What it means is that descriptions of Berber, Jewish, or French culture must be cast in terms of the constructions we imagine Berbers, Jews or Frenchmen to place upon what they live through, the formulae they use to define what happens to them."¹⁹

Arlt, Venturini, or González Alcántara, just like the other characters in Guerriero's chronicles and profiles, are cast in their own words, but as Guerriero "imagines" them. Like spider webs, held together by the tension, the pulling strings of contradictory forces, Guerriero's narratives catch truth in

the negative space of stories.

When I asked her whether she knew about Billie Holiday's song before naming her book *Frutos extraños*, Guerriero told me that, in fact, she didn't: her book had been named after a painting by Argentine artist Guillermo Kuitka, and she only learned about the song a few years after the book was published. Kuitka, who knew Holiday and the song, had appropriated the title, channeling the lynching through his painting. It would be hard to know how much of these images, much less how much of the original ideas in the song, has reemerged in Guerriero's stories. But *Frutos extraños*, *Plano americano*, and all of Guerriero's long-form work show glimmers of that horror that shines in the particular space between fact and testimony, that primitive form of truth that is told as it is witnessed, imagined, and reimagined, by our collective storytelling.

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Notes

1. Alan Pauls, "The Curiosity Factor," *In*, October 2013, <http://in-lan.com/en/personage/interviews-personage/the-curiosity-factor/>.

2. All of the translations are mine.

3. Leila Guerriero, "Me gusta ser mujer . . . y odio a las histéricas," in *Frutos extraños* (Bogotá: Aguilar, 2009), 326.

4. Guerriero, "Sobre algunas mentiras del periodismo," in *Frutos extraños*, 348–49.

5. Mario Vargas Llosa, "Periodismo y creación: *Plano americano*," *El País* (Montevideo, Uruguay), May 19, 2013, http://elpais.com/elpais/2013/05/16/opinion/1368714188_384998.html.

6. Ramón Lobo, "Leila Guerriero: 'El periodismo objetivo es la gran men-

tira del universo, todo es subjetivo,” *Jotdown*. <http://www.jotdown.es/2013/11/lei%C2%ADla-gue%C2%ADrrie%C2%ADro-el-periodismo-objetivo-es-la-gran-mentira-del-universo-todo-es-subjetivo/>.

7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1962), 346–47.

8. Guerriero, “Buscando a Nicanor,” in *Plano americano* (Santiago, Chile: Universidad Diego Portales, 2013), 13. Italics mine.

9. Guerriero, *Una historia sencilla* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2013), 52–53. Italics mine.

10. Ibid.

11. Guerriero, “Quién le teme a Aurora Venturini,” in *Plano americano*, 378–407.

12. Guerriero, “Roberto Arlt. La vida breve,” in *Plano americano*, 374.

13. In *Between Parenthesis* (New York: New Directions, 2011), 23. Roberto Bolaño writes about the myth of Arlt’s coffin: “In any case, it’s Piglia who raises up Arlt in his own coffin soaring Buenos Aires, in a very Piglian or Arltian scene, though one that takes place only in Piglia’s imagination, not in reality. It wasn’t a crane that lowered Arlt’s coffin. The stairs were wide enough for the job. The body in the box wasn’t a heavyweight champion’s.”

14. Ibid.

15. Guerriero, “Roberto Arlt. La vida breve,” in *Plano Americano*, 374–75.

16. Ibid., 375.

17. Pauls, “Curiosity Factor.”

18. I am borrowing the term from Clifford Geertz’s idea of “thick description,” in “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Harper Collins, 1973). For the difference between “ethnographic realism” and “cultural phenomenology,” see David L. Eason, “The New Journalism and the Image-World: Two Modes of Organizing Experience,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1, no. 1 (1984): 51–65.

19. Geertz, 316.