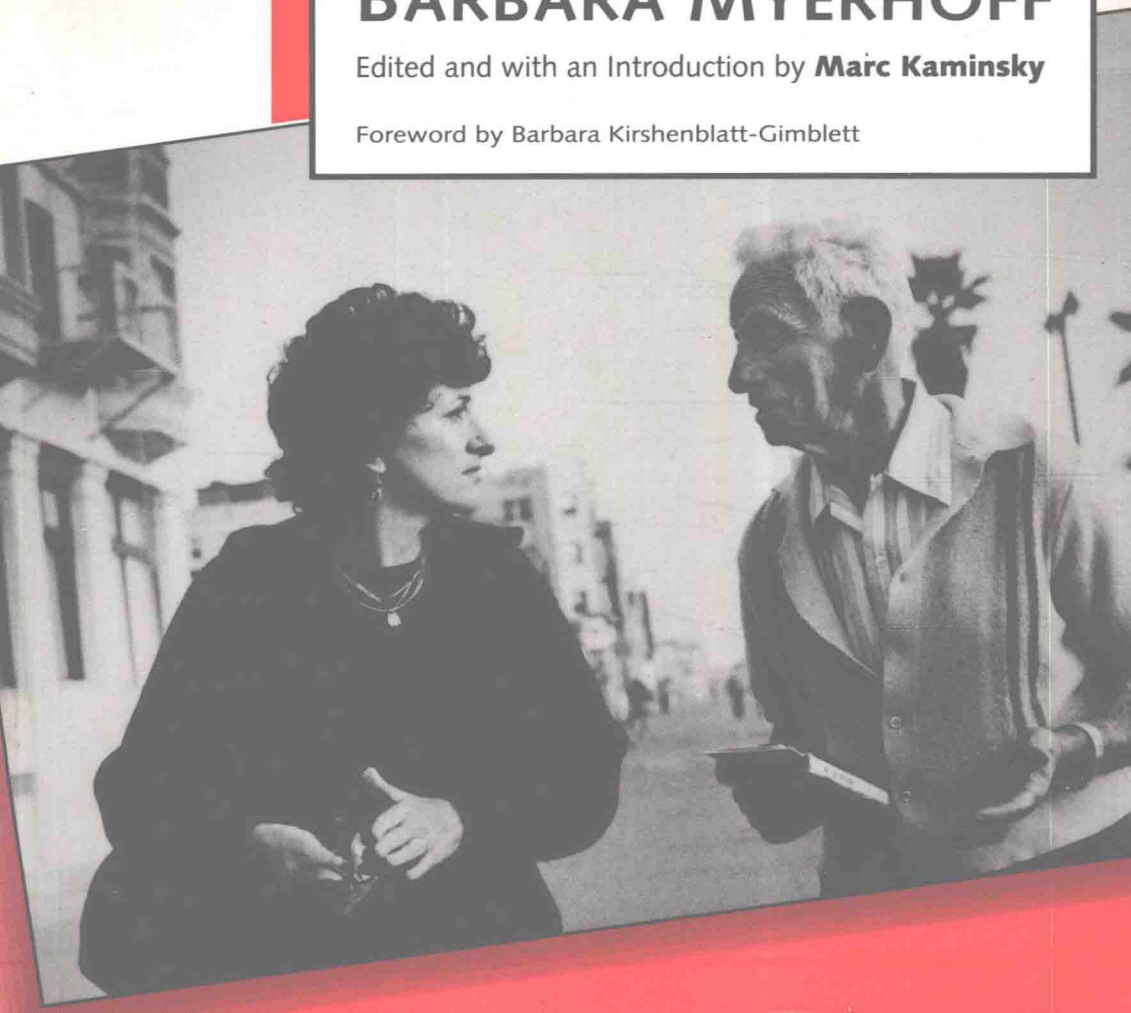
Remembered Lives

THE WORK OF RITUAL, STORYTELLING, AND GROWING OLDER

BARBARA MYERHOFF

Edited and with an Introduction by **Marc Kaminsky**

Foreword by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett



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Ann Arbor

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS

Published in the United States of America by
The University of Michigan Press
Manufactured in the United States of America

1995 1994 1993 1992 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Myerhoff, Barbara G.

Remembered lives : the work of ritual, storytelling, and growing older / Barbara Myerhoff ; with Deena Metzger, Jay Ruby, and Virginia Tufte ; edited and with an introduction by Marc Kaminsky ; foreword by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-472-10317-2 (alk. paper). — ISBN 0-472-08177-2 (paper : alk. paper)

1. Jewish aged—United States—Social conditions. 2. Jewish aged—United States—Social life and customs. 2. Social work with the aged—California—Los Angeles. 4. Jewish aged—California—Los Angeles—Biography. 5. Venice (Los Angeles, Calif.) I. Kaminsky, Marc, 1943– . II. Title.

HQ1064.U5M86 1992

305.26'089'924—dc20 92-12466

CIP

Acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the editors of the publications in which the majority of these essays first appeared:

"Aging and the Aged in Other Cultures: An Anthropological Perspective," in *Contemporary Gerontology: Issues and Concepts,* ed. James E. Birren (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press, 1970), 545–81. This paper was originally prepared for and presented to the Summer Institute, Andrus Gerontology Center, University of Southern California, 1968. The same version was later published in *The Anthropology of Health,* ed. Eleanor E. Bauwens (St. Louis: The C. V. Mosby Co., 1978).

"We Don't Wrap Herring in a Printed Page: Fusion, Fictions, and Continuity in Secular Ritual," in *Secular Ritual: Forms and Meanings,* ed. Sally Falk Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum Press, 1977), 199–224.

"A Death in Due Time: Conviction, Order, and Continuity in Ritual Drama," unpublished manuscript, Myerhoff Archives, University of Southern California, 1–46. This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, December, 1975. A later version of the essay, in which the conceptual framework was revised, was published under the title, "A Symbol Perfected in Death: Continuity and Ritual in the Life and Death of an Elderly Jew," in *Life's Career: Cross-Cultural Studies in Growing Old,* ed. Barbara G. Myerhoff and Andrei Simic (New York: Sage Publications, 1978). A third version, in which minor modifications were made in the theoretical discussion, appeared as "A Death in Due Time: Construction of Self and Culture in Ritual Drama," in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle,* ed. T. J. MacAloon (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984).

"Bobbes and Zeydes: Old and New Roles for Elderly Jews," in *Women in Ritual and Symbolic Roles,* eds. Judith Hoch-Smith and Anita Springs (New York: Plenum, 1978), 207–41.

"Experience at the Threshold: The Interplay of Aging and Ritual," excerpt from an essay entitled "Rites and Signs of Ripening: The Intertwining of Ritual, Time, and Growing Older," in *Age and Anthropological Theory,* eds. David I. Kertzer and Jennie Keith (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 305–30.

"Life History among the Elderly: Performance, Visibility, and Re-membering," in *Life Course: Integrative Theories and Exemplary Populations,* ed. Kurt Back (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, for the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1980), 133–53. The essay was republished in *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology,* ed. Jay Ruby (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

"Life History as Integration: Personal Myth and Aging," by Barbara G. Myerhoff and Virginia Tufte, unpublished manuscript, Myerhoff Archives, University of Southern California, 1–11. This paper was presented at the 10th International Congress of Gerontology, Jerusalem, June, 1975. A subsequent version of this essay appeared as "Life History as Integration: An Essay on an Experiential Model," in *The Gerontologist* December 1975.

"'Life Not Death in Venice': Its Second Life," in *The Anthropology of Experience,* eds. Victor Turner and Edward M. Bruner (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 261–87.

"Surviving Stories: Reflections on *Number Our Days,*" in *Between Two Worlds: Ethnographic Essays on American Jewry,* ed. Jack Kugelmass (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 265–94. This essay, which Barbara Myerhoff left unfinished at the time of her death, was revised and completed by Marc Kaminsky. Excerpts from the essay were published under the same title in *Tikkun* (vol. 2, no. 5, November/December, 1987), 19–25.

"A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology," by Barbara Myerhoff and Jay Ruby, originally appeared as the "Introduction" to *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology,* ed. Jay Ruby (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 1–35.

"The Journal as Activity and Genre," by Barbara Myerhoff and Deena Metzger, in *Semiotica* 30 (1/2, 1980), 97–114. An early version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, December, 1977. In a revised form, this version was published as "Dear Diary" in *Chrysalis* 7 (Winter, 1979), 39–49.

Foreword

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

Barbara Myerhoff died January 7, 1985, one month before her fiftieth birthday. Her life was taken by cancer, after seven months of battling the disease. Her death ended a brilliant career at its peak. "Give her the fruit of her hands; And let her works praise her at the gates" (Proverbs 31). These words, chosen by Barbara herself for the dedication to *Number Our Days,* are a fitting epigraph for this homage to her.

Victor Turner, who wrote the foreword to *Number Our Days* (1978), said of Barbara that she was thrice-born. Her first life began in Cleveland, Ohio, where she grew up in an American Jewish milieu that was liberal and middle class. In her dissertation research and first book, she did what anthropologists are trained to do—she entered a culture remote from her own, that of the Huichol Indians of northern Mexico. In the last dozen years of her life, she returned to American Jewish culture, this time as a Jewish anthropologist living in Los Angeles. She embraced each of her lives with *leyb un lebn,* with body and soul, identifying deeply with those she studied and interweaving her lives with those of her subjects.

Barbara's training began at the University of California, Los Angeles, where in 1958 she received her bachelor's degree in sociology. Her master's work in human development at the University of Chicago culminated in 1963 in her thesis, "Father-Daughter Incest among Delinquent Adolescent Girls." In 1968 she was awarded the doctorate in anthropology with distinction at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her dissertation was published as *Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of the Huichol Indians* in 1974 and was nominated for a National Book Award the following year.

Through the 1960s in Los Angeles, Barbara worked as a social worker with the elderly and as a research associate on projects dealing with youth problems ranging from juvenile delinquency and gangs to school

success. By 1968, the year she finished her dissertation on the Huichol, Barbara was clearly formulating her ideas about the study of aging. The paper she delivered that summer for the Andrus Gerontology Center at the University of Southern California assessed anthropological approaches to the subject. Integrating her academic training and her social work experience, Barbara was laying the foundation for the two major projects on the Jewish elderly of Los Angeles that would occupy her for the rest of her life. The first focused on the Israel Levin Senior Adult Center in Venice and the second on the Jewish neighborhood of Fairfax.

When encouraged during the early 1970s to undertake a major research project on ethnicity and aging, Barbara thought immediately of Chicanos, a logical outgrowth of her previous work in Mexico. After all, anthropologists typically study someone else, not themselves. Only after the communities she approached kept asking her why she was interested in them and not in her own people did she turn to the Jews of Venice, much to her own amazement. She was to recall years later, "I sat on the benches outside the [Israel Levin Senior Adult] Center and thought about how strange it was to be back in the neighborhood where sixteen years before I had lived and for a time had been a social worker with elderly citizens on public relief. . . . I had made no conscious decision to explore my roots or clarify the meanings of my origins." As the Venice project progressed, Barbara kept asking herself, "Was it anthropology or a personal quest?"

In trying to understand why the Venice work had been so compelling to her, Barbara wrote, "However much I would learn from that [my work with the Huichol] was limited by the fact that I would never really be a Huichol Indian. But I would be a little old Jewish lady one day; thus it was essential for me to learn what the condition was like, in all its particulars. . . . I consider myself very fortunate in having had, through this work, an opportunity to anticipate, rehearse, and contemplate my own future. This had given me a temporal integration to my life that seems to me an essential ingredient in the work of maturing." Barbara never lived to be the little old Jewish lady she imagined as her fate, but in her characteristic anthropological fashion, she identified imaginatively with what it would be like, and in this way, we might say that anthropology allowed her to know what destiny would deny her.

In retrospect, it was almost as if Barbara had begun numbering her days with the Venice work. The epigraph to the first chapter of *Number Our Days,* an adaptation from psalms 144 and 90, reads:

Man is like breath,
His days are as a fleeting shadow.

In the morning he flourishes and grows up like grass
In the evening he is cut down and withers.

So teach us to number our days,
That we may get a heart of wisdom.

First she completed the film *Number Our Days,* which won an Academy Award as best documentary short subject in 1976. Then she finished the book, which appeared in 1978 and was selected as one of the ten best social science books by the *New York Times Book Review* a year later. Both the film and the book won other prizes as well.

The Venice experience had whetted Barbara's appetite. When she visited New York, I took her to Jewish neighborhoods in Brooklyn. When I visited Los Angeles, she took me to Venice. We compared notes—Fairfax, Boro Park, Poland, America, her childhood in Cleveland, mine in Toronto. . . . I had met Barbara just as she was finishing the book. She had turned to me as a specialist in Jewish ethnography and asked if I would read the manuscript. I saw immediately that she had produced a landmark volume in the anthropological study of American Jewish life.

It was even more astonishing to witness the process by which she had used the tools of her chosen discipline to transmit to herself (as well as to her readers) cultural knowledge that had passed her by in the course of growing up. Indeed, the very inventiveness that she attributed to her research subjects was equally true of herself. Despite the metaphors of inevitability conjured up when Barbara identified the elderly Jews of Venice with her "roots" and "origins," she had chosen—not inherited—them. She had made them her fictive kin and adopted their old age as a model for the old age she would never have. Barbara did not dig up her roots or unearth her origins so much as use her ethnographic tool kit to "invent" her culture of choice under the tutelage of masters, though her European-born grandmother had prepared her to discover richness in a world close at hand. Barbara recalled, as a very young child, moving into her grandmother's house after her father left the family. During the winter, when the kitchen window steamed up, her grandmother placed a penny against the glass, creating a peephole, and talked to her about the world they could see through the tiny opening.

American anthropologists have been slow to study Jewish culture in a sustained fashion. The reasons are worthy of study in their own right. They have also been reluctant, with some exceptions, to study American culture until relatively recently—since World War II. For these topics to command serious attention, they need to be engaged with theoretical imagination and discursive experimentation. Writing anthropologically about cultures at hand dramatizes the artifice of scholarly distance and challenges the ethnographer to make the ordinary interesting—what's more, those about whom one writes are likely to read what one publishes, particularly in the case of American Jews. Barbara met the challenge brilliantly.

Victor Turner, a close friend and collaborator, wrote in the foreword of *Number Our Days,* "Although this book celebrates the elderly and an ancient tradition, it is also in the vanguard of anthropological theory. With it anthropology has come of age: its extremes have touched. Barriers between self and other, head and heart, conscious and unconscious, history and autobiography, have been thrown down, and new ways have been found to express the vital interdependence of these and other mighty opposites." This is the hallmark of Barbara's work—it was in her intensely human and compassionate grasp of the lives of those around her that she most fully took hold of her own life. It was in this embrace that she also did her richest anthropological thinking and most eloquent writing.

As a student of ritual, Barbara understood the theatricality of culture at its most extravagant. But she was also attuned to the performative in everyday life, so much so that, in addition to writing about her subjects, she presented them in festivals and exhibitions, on film and in the theater—*Number Our Days* became a play at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. Barbara collaborated with artists, poets, and filmmakers —among them Deena Metzger, Naomi Newman, Lynne Littman—not only in the production of films and theater, but also in her teaching, where she was as experimental with her students as with her readers. Richard Schechner, founder and director of the Performance Group, brought Barbara to New York University in 1979, where she participated in his seminar "Performance and Anthropology." Together with Victor Turner, they forged a pioneering nexus between these two areas. Working on the principle that performing was a way of knowing, Barbara returned to NYU's Department of Performance Studies several years later to teach a memorable workshop with Arthur Strimling in which students gathered

life histories and performed them. Marc Kaminsky, who has so ably prepared this volume, brought her to the Hunter/Brookdale Center on Aging to offer ritual and storytelling workshops with Strimling. Her workshops in New York City became legendary.

The Venice work completed, Barbara cast about for the next project. During her speech at the dedication of the new Freda Mohr building in Fairfax, Los Angeles, on December 12, 1982, she said,

> When I finished the Venice study, which became the movie, book, and play known as *Number Our Days,* I was worried about what I would do next. How would I find a project to match that one: it would have to have meaning to the people I was studying, they would have to participate and benefit from it in direct ways. I wanted it to be among Jews, nearby not far away; I wanted it to include the elderly, though not be confined to them. And I had to be a part of the people, so that I could produce a study that was not merely a scientific report but something with my own emotions as well as mind at work, something that would involve my own identity, and the Jewish identity of those I would work with.

The result was the last project she would undertake, a study of the neighborhood of Fairfax, a once thriving Jewish community that had declined and was making a strong comeback, as Soviet Jews and Lubavitcher Hasidim moved into the area. Barbara was to become part of the people she was studying in ways she could never have anticipated; two years into the project, she found herself battling the disease that was to take her life. The Lubavitcher Hasidim living in Fairfax embraced the challenge of trying to save Barbara's life through her interest in their faith.

In a manner that was so essentially her own, Barbara's anthropological research was simultaneously a battle for life itself. She let the Lubavitcher community rally around her. They had her visit the *mikve* (ritual bath), where in a state of purity she could make a wish. They changed her name so the angel of death would not be able to find her. They made her undergo a *get,* a Jewish divorce, to detach her soul from her former husband and return it to her. They helped her write a letter to the *rebe* for a miracle cure.

Facing the failures of medical science and the insatiable desire for knowledge of the people she was studying, Barbara came to know her

subjects as they tried to save her. All these events Barbara recorded on film, perhaps the most reflexive medium of all, particularly in her hands. Barbara had tried repeatedly and without success to get Lynne Littman to make this film—Barbara had originally intended the film to deal with the diverse Jewish community of Fairfax (Lubavitcher Hasidism, Russians, and gays), but yielding to Lubavitcher protests about the mixture of subjects, she shifted the focus to them. After Barbara became sick, she prevailed on Lynne again. This time Lynne agreed, but only on condition that Barbara, and her relationship to the Hasidim, become the subject of the film.

There is a marvelous scene in the Fairfax film, *In Her Own Time,* where Barbara is fitted out with a *sheytl,* a wig, by a Hasidic woman. Barbara was worried that she would lose her hair during chemotherapy, a fear that proved unfounded. What she lost were her "Jewish curls," as she put it. As each wig is tried on, Barbara chats intimately with the saleswoman about what it is like to be an Orthodox Jewish woman, about the relations between men and women, about eroticism. As they tried to help her, the Jews of Fairfax became even more open to her profound desire to understand them from both a personal and an anthropological perspective, for Barbara tried and succeeded in integrating the two, nowhere more poignantly than in her last work.

Barbara's work inspired others because she addressed profoundly human questions—questions of survival, dignity, meaning, faith, aging, dying. She was bold and experimental. Her generosity and enthusiasm were boundless, her energy a beacon. In her short life, cut off in the morning of her mature years, she produced books and articles ranging over a stunning array of subjects—the family, juvenile delinquency, religion, shamanism, ritual, symbol and politics, ideology, women's values, life history, gender and ethnicity, and aging. She touched the lives of everyone who knew her, those she studied and those she taught.

A student of whom she was specially proud, Riv-Ellen Prell, remembered Barbara most appropriately with the words of Maimonides: "When one's teacher dies, the student rends his/her garments until the heart is exposed—and the tear may never be stitched again."

Author's Acknowledgments

Some of the research on which "We Don't Wrap Herring in a Printed Page" is based took place between 1972 and 1973. It was funded by a National Science Foundation Grant G1-34953X administered through the Andrus Gerontology Center of the University of Southern California, Social and Cultural Contexts of Aging Project, Los Angeles, California. All proper names of individuals and organizations are fictitious.

The fieldwork on which "A Death in Due Time" is based was funded by the National Science Foundation RANN Grant APR-75-21178 and the 1907 Foundation of the United Parcel Service, administered through the Ethnicity and Aging Project at the Andrus Gerontology Center of the University of Southern California. All names in the paper have been changed. Unfortunately, this makes it impossible to publicly acknowledge my gratitude to many of the people whose assistance made this paper possible. In particular, the family of the deceased, the Center director and president, the social worker, and the rabbi, all of whom were interviewed, were exceedingly helpful.

Much of the theoretical approach to ritual presented and applied here was elaborated with Professor Sally F. Moore over discussions lasting several years and culminating in a Wenner-Gren Conference on Secular Ritual (Burg Wartenstein, 1974). I find it no longer possible to say what is her part and what is mine. These ideas now appear as the "Introduction" in *Secular Ritual: Forms and Meanings,* Royal Van Gorcum Press, 1977.

The research on which "Bobbes and Zeydes" is based took place between 1972 and 1975. Information reported here is drawn in part from the Social and Cultural Contexts of Aging Project (V. L. Bengston, principal investigator; Barbara Myerhoff, project director) at the Andrus Gerontology Center of the University of Southern California. This program was supported by grants from the National Science Foundation (NSF)'s RANN program (APR-75-21178) and by the 1907 Foundation of the United Parcel Service. Conclusions are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of NSF or the 1907 Foundation. All proper names of individuals and organizations are fictitious.

Part of the funding for the research on which "Life History among the Elderly" is based was provided by the National Science Foundation, through the Andrus

Gerontology Center of the University of Southern California, in connection with a study of "Ethnicity and Aging." All names of individuals and organizations have been changed.

Special thanks are due to Victor and Edith Turner, Richard Schechner, and Alexander Alland, whose seminar on "Performance and Anthropology" at the Graduate Department of Drama, School of the Arts, New York University in June, 1979, provided information and inspiration for many of the ideas discussed here. The 1977 Wenner-Gren Foundation conference convened by the author and Barbara Babcock on "Cultural Frames and Reflections: Ritual, Drama and Spectacle" was a critical event in developing some of my interpretations of reflexivity. Gelya Frank provided stimulation and generously shared references and ideas. Naturally, only I am responsible for the views given here.

The research on which "Life History as Integration" was based was funded by Grant G1-34953X under the Exploratory Research and Problem Assessment component of the National Science Foundation's Research Applied to National Needs Program.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Morris Rosen, director of the Israel Levin Senior Adult Center, Venice, California, in which Life History classes for senior citizens were conducted (February to June, 1973), and to Elizabeth Thompson who assisted in running many of the classes.

The research on which the paper "'Life Not Death in Venice'" is based was part of a larger study entitled "Social Contexts of Aging," funded by the National Science Foundation and administered through the Andrus Gerontology Center of the University of Southern California. I would like to acknowledge the people who made the cultural festival entitled "Life Not Death in Venice" possible and to thank them for their generosity in helping to produce the festival and for assisting me in gathering the written and visual materials I needed to do this preliminary analysis. At the University of Southern California, Center for Visual Anthropology: Alexander Moore and Denise Lawrence; College of Continuing Education: Barbara Perrow; Department of Anthropology: Sherrie Wagner and Vikram Jayanti. Partial funding for portions of the festival was provided by the Ford Foundation and the California Council for the Humanities.

In "Surviving Stories," the exhibition titled "Life Not Death in Venice" was produced and coordinated by Vikram Jayanti in conjunction with the Center for Visual Anthropology, Department of Anthropology, University of Southern California, and by Alexander Moore and Timothy Asch, department chair and Center director, respectively.

I am particularly grateful to Marc Kaminsky for his leadership in exploring the area of survivor stories. The conference he convened on survivors' narratives at the Brookdale Center on Aging of Hunter College in 1983 was the occasion for my examining this genre more closely.

"A Crack in the Mirror" grew in part out of a day-long symposium organized by the author and Jay Ruby for the American Anthropological Association meetings in 1978 entitled "Portrayal of Self, Profession, and Culture: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology." The symposium consisted of the following participants and papers:

Stephen Lansing (University of Southern California), "An Island in the Liminal Zone"; Paul Rabinow (University of California, Berkeley), "Observer and Observed: New Forms of Anthropological Presentation"; Dennis Tedlock (University of Massachusetts), "Between Text and Interpretation: Toward a Dialogical Anthropology"; John Szwed (University of Pennsylvania), "Ethnography—A Meditation"; Denise O'Brien (Temple University), "Images of Women in the South Seas"; Carol Ann Parssinen (Institute for the Study of Human Issues), "Social Explorers and Social Scientists: The Dark Continent of Victorian Ethnography"; Barbara Babcock (University of Arizona), "The Dangers of 'Delight-making' and the Difficulty of Describing It"; Victor Turner (University of Virginia), "Performative and Reflexive Anthropology"; Jay Ruby (Temple University), "Ethnography as Trompe L'Oeil: Film and Anthropology"; Ira Abrams (University of Southern California), "A Reflexive View of Anthropology Through Its Film"; Richard Chalfen (Temple University), "Ethnofilm and Docudrama: Constructing and Interpreting Ambiguous Realities"; Eric Michaels (University of Texas), "Looking at Us Looking at the Yanomami Looking at Us"; Dan Rose (University of Pennsylvania), discussant.

—Barbara Myerhoff

Editor's Acknowledgments

I am thankful to Barbara Myerhoff for the gift of her colleagueship and friendship and am grateful to her for having asked me to edit her papers.

The Myerhoff Center at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research offered the conditions of possibility and provided the support that enabled me to carry out this work.

To Deena Metzger, Barbara Myerhoff's lifelong friend, her literary executor, and codirector of the Myerhoff Center, I offer my thanks and gratitude. Her collaborative presence was indispensable in carrying through this task.

To Dr. Maury Leibovitz, President of the Myerhoff Center, I offer my thankfulness and gratitude. His commitment to Barbara Myerhoff's legacy and life-history work among the elderly as well as his generosity have been the foundation upon which the Center has been organized.

I extend my thanks and gratitude to Polly Howells who, as friend, colleague and co-chair of the Center's Committee on Research and Publication, has been crucial in sustaining the Center's work.

Diane Demeter has played an important role in the Center as a friend, board member, and co-chair of the Committee on Research and Publication. To her and to Steven Demeter I offer my thanks and gratitude.

I am grateful to Naomi Newman and Micah Taubman, who initiated the formation of the Center soon after Barbara Myerhoff's death; and to Harriet Rzetelny, Director of the Training and Workshop Program. Arthur Strimling directed the Living History Program between 1988 and 1990.

I acknowledge with thanks the contribution that Jerry Mark, Penninah Schram, and Steven Zeitlin have made to the Center through their dedicated colleagueship.

Bill McClellan and Tom Cole have been the friends with whom I have engaged in the long dialogue on cultural studies and gerontology that has constituted the good working conditions in which this project was completed. Their reading and criticism of the introductory essay through several revisions helped improve the text.

Two colleagues worked closely with me on editing Myerhoff's papers. Jack Kugelmass, then Associate Dean of the Max Weinreich Center at YIVO, was an invaluable anthropologist-informant, who answered my questions on textual

problems related to the ethnography of the culture of Yiddishkeit. Audrey Levine, Research Associate at the Myerhoff Center, made an important contribution to the editing process not only by her dedication, through long hours of work, but also by her meticulous scrutiny of the essays. She was responsible for compiling the front matter and the bibliography.

The introduction was read and criticized by Sol Yurick and Stanley Aronowitz, whose comments were important to me in articulating my critique of Myerhoff's work. This text was produced betwixt and between and in dialogue with and across two different collegial communities: those of cultural studies and humanistic gerontology. I thank the members of the *Social Text* editorial board, particularly Sohnya Sayres, Bruce Robbins, and George Yudice, for their critical reading of the first section of the introduction. The gerontologists whose comments have informed my work on this book project include Andrew Achenbaum, George Getzel, and Robert Kastenbaum.

The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, which provided an institutional home for the Myerhoff Center, has my thanks. The interventions of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Samuel Norich, and Adrienne Cooper, respectively Senior Researcher, Executive Director, and then Assistant Director, are deeply appreciated. The library, archival, and research staff deserve the high regard in which they are held by scholars: I acknowledge with gratitude the very great helpfulness and expertise of Jeffrey Shandler, Zachary Baker, Dina Abramowicz, and Marek Web.

I am grateful to the foundations that supported the Center's Research and Publication Program: the Emet Foundation, the Morris P. Leibovitz Foundation, the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation, the Morris J. and Betty Kaplun Foundation, the Pauline Yuells Markel Charitable Trust, and the Tides Foundation.

Pamela Ween Brumberg and William Frost, respectively Program Officer and President of the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation, warrant special acknowledgment for their understanding that scholarly labors often take longer than expected to see into print, and for their personal as well as financial support.

The support of Lawrence Newman, board member and Yiddish scholar, has likewise been personal as well as material, and is very much appreciated. Gratitude, too, to Leonard Fassler, whose gift helped establish the Research and Publication Program.

To Allen Bergson, Alice Fennessey, Harriet Rzetelny, Mark Weiss, Eric Werthman, and Carolyn Zablotny, I offer my thanks and gratitude for their involvement in the dailiness of my work at the Center.

Finally, and most immediately, the living through of this necessarily slow process was grounded in a house saturated with the *mentshlichkeit* of my wife and the ordinary miracle of my daughter's and son's discovery of language and life: for a daily life in contact with these transmitted and transmitting qualities, of which Myerhoff wrote in praise, I thank Maddy, Julia, and Daniel.

* * *

Editorial interventions were kept to a minimum. Obvious errors were corrected. Punctuation and mechanics were made consistent. The transliteration of Yiddish words was conventionalized, in accord with the YIVO system. The separate essays of a scholar necessarily contain many repeated elements, such as the presentation of the ethnographic background of the subjects or the conceptual framework to be implemented or "touchstone" quotations of authorities and informants. The question, in editing a volume of collected papers, is not whether to omit redundant passages, but from which text to cut which particular repetition. These infinitesimally small textual decisions were made on a case-by-case basis. The guiding principle was that, in determining the fate of a paragraph, a sentence, a phrase, or a word, mere "overuse" was not decisive; the separate essay had to be able to withstand the cut without palpable loss. In difficult instances, the decision was made to err on the side of excess.

—Marc Kaminsky