

American Ethnologist

The Journal of the American Ethnological Society

American Ethnologist Volume 33 Number 1 November 2005
posted Feb 2006

Book Reviews On-line

My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student. *Rebekah Nathan.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005. ix + 186pp. , notes, references, index.

Hervé Varenne

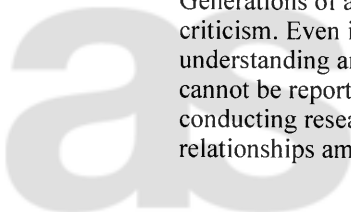
Teachers College, Columbia University

This book will probably be remembered for author Cathy Small's failed attempt to pass as "Rebekah Nathan," or, as she put it, "to protect the students" she had spent a year with ("Understanding Student Culture," *Anthropology News*, 1995, 46[7]:17). For reasons that initially sound plausible, Small decided to conduct her study of college student life *as* a student, applying to the university where she is a faculty member, paying tuition, taking courses, and living in a dorm. She played the student role for a year, and the experience was successful—as far as she is concerned. As the title of the book states, she "became" a student. From her own evidence, I am not sure she succeeded. She mentions at least twice that students kept identifying her as a "mom." She also states that she remained a "partial observer owing to my age". This may not be surprising, but it opens the question of whether the whole attempt to pass was worth it, methodologically and theoretically, if not ethically.

Given its limitations as anthropology, the book will probably be most useful in discussions of anthropological ethics. The research was approved by the university's institutional review board (IRB)—so it met legal requirements. Small ends the book with an "afterword on ethics and ethnography." There, she gives a brief account of issues not raised in the IRB, her decision to go beyond IRB strictures, and summaries of cases in which she "disclosed her identity." By writing in this way, Small acknowledges that she never achieved a student identity and that the revelation of her "secret" always produced difficulties. She quotes a bona fide student who told her that Small had "fooled" her by not telling her she was a faculty member. This is the tone of the reaction to the full public revelation. Still, no evidence so far suggests that anyone was hurt by Small's impersonation (although the case is not closed). To that extent, at least, my sense is that her decision was ethical.

But was it worth it anthropologically? Small is convinced that what she wanted to learn could only be learned through deception. But she does not actually develop why she felt this to be so. Her justifications are phrased in terms of "what I learned personally," not in terms of what the anthropological community might learn. She compares what she knew before the experience to what she learned as a result. She wrote the book first for herself, and, secondarily, for college professors *as teachers* (rather than researchers). Her research questions were variations on "Why don't students do what professionals expect them to do?" She was looking for explanation of absences. Like generations of anthropologists, she went looking for a lack in her natives. She returned to tell academia: There are good reasons for the lack; it has something to do with the natives' "culture"; "understanding this culture" would make it easier for those in authority to deal with the natives.

Generations of anthropologists have criticized this discursive process, but Small ignores this criticism. Even if one stays within her own problematics, secrecy does not add to understanding and may limit it: She repeatedly mentions that many of her observations cannot be reported precisely because those whom she observed were not aware she was conducting research. This may account for, among other matters, a lack of reports on relationships among the students—perhaps because Small did not go so far as actually to be



anthrosource

www.anthrosource.net

the kind of friend in whom one confides. To flesh out her reports, she refers to various anthropological studies of college students, particularly Michael Moffatt's book *Coming of Age in New Jersey: College and American Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 1989). Moffatt did attempt to pass as a student, but only briefly. He also lived in a dorm, but all there knew he was a faculty member. In the end, he gives more details about college life than Small does and his remains the work of reference. Small's chapter on "Community and Diversity" is original. It gives a sense of the hegemonic ideologies students sometimes resist. The chapter on "time management" may be useful to college professionals. But the book as a whole does not provide much new information.

Anthropologically, the work may be useful for discussions of what it does not face, that is, the possibility of "passing" as a theoretical concern. What are the mechanisms for passing? What can one learn about social processes when someone does pass? I look to follow-up articles in which Small-Nathan tells what exactly she did: What was she asked? What convinced students that she was a bona fide student? What *is* a bona fide student, professor, woman of a certain age, or friend? Answering these questions might reveal more about students, the United States, and anthropology.



anthrosource

www.anthrosource.net