

Mix of the following prompts:

2. *When Scheper-Hughes returned to the shanty town as an anthropologist, she witnessed further loss of life as she studied its causes, effects and social construction. How did Scheper-Hughes' ethical obligations as a professional anthropologist differ from those she embraced as a Peace Corps volunteer?*

3. *Much of academic anthropology argues that its analysis and writing should be "scientific" and "objective," meaning that it should represent a critical and non-partisan point of view rather than one that takes sides or engages in activism or advocacy. Why? To what extent does Scheper-Hughes' writing in "Culture, Scarcity and Maternal Thinking" reflect this scholarly distance and non-judgmental reserve? Is she thoroughly dispassionate and non-partisan, semi-partisan or fully partisan? Discuss.*

In her 1995 article, *The Primacy of the Ethical*, Nancy Scheper-Hughes argues that the popularly endorsed "anthropology of deconstruction," traditionally characterized by objective observation and distanced analysis, is lacking in realism. She goes on to show her support for an alternate type of dynamic anthropology in which the anthropologist is placed in the role of active participant, rather than indifferent observer. This distinction, which Scheper-Hughes defines as "the difference between the anthropologist as a 'spectator' and the anthropologist as a 'witness' " (*Primacy*, 419), orients her later fieldwork as an ethically engaged, partisan endeavor.

Considering this latter standpoint in light of her earlier 1985 work, *Culture, Scarcity, and Maternal Thinking*, it is interesting to note that Scheper-Hughes' writing reflects a pre-revisionist style of observational anthropology. As such, *Maternal Thinking* provides us with a generally non-partisan, scientific study of "maternal detachment." Given Scheper-Hughes previous social work in Alto do Cruzeiro, Brazil, this objective standpoint makes for a stronger exposé than if she had decided to write a series of anecdotal accounts reminiscent of Margaret Mead's work in Samoa. In fact, it seems that her inclusion of the two anecdotes about Rosa and Ze are strategically placed at the beginning of her work in order to get them out of the way, quickly moving on to show the reader that the analysis to follow will be a distanced work of spectator observation.

Indeed, rather than using these stories to make sweeping generalizations about the Alto culture as a whole, she states: "I introduce these vignettes as caveats to the following analysis" (*Maternal Thinking*, 293). Thus, the anecdotes are used to show that she will not rely on the information she acquired during her period of involvement and activism 20 years earlier as part of the Peace Corps. Instead, she will provide an account of revisited anthropological work oriented according to traditional anthropological standards. Additionally, we notice that her study is much more scientific in the sense that she includes charts and a heavy use of statistics, specifically in relation to her analysis on the traditional birthing environment and initial weeks of life (See *Maternal Thinking*: 311-312). In this way, we are set up to accept her analysis as a scientific, non-partisan account – a work of professionalism, rather than informal storytelling or biased cultural representation.

This said, after reading about Scheper-Hughes' new type of activist anthropology endorsed in *The Primacy of the Ethical*, it appears to me that, looking back, she may have been disappointed in herself for engaging in the type of distanced writing that *Maternal Thinking* incorporates. In her 1995 article, she advocates: "a more 'womanly' anthropology [...] concerned not only with how humans think but with how they behave toward each other. This would engage anthropology directly with questions of ethics" (*Primacy*, 418). Looking towards her earlier text with this in mind, I can't help but think that the following statement may have a double meaning: "mother-infant attachment is often muted and *protectively distanced*" (*Maternal Thinking*, 311). Perhaps, in writing about maternal distancing within the Brazilian shantytown, Scheper-Hughes reached an awareness of anthropology as a "distanced" field, muted to morality and lacking in behavioral engagement through its purposefully removed state. The fact that she calls for a shift towards a more "womanly" anthropology is interesting in light of the fact that she identifies herself as a feminist. Taken metaphorically, if activist anthropology is her brainchild, then Scheper-Hughes appears to be suffering from an extreme case of postpartum depression following the publishing of her 1985 work.

It is relevant, then, to realize that post-1987, she was inspired to engage in fieldwork during subsequent trips to Brazil in which she: "assumed the local *cargo* of anthropologist-*companheira*, dividing [her] time [...] between anthropology and political work" (*Primacy*, 411). I believe that, had Scheper-Hughes written her account of the Brazilian shantytown from her 1995 perspective, the tone would have been fully altered to include a more activist agenda. As a Peace Corp volunteer, Scheper-Hughes was in Brazil to create change. As an anthropologist, she was forced to observe. In order to uphold a degree of professionalism, Scheper-Hughes had to take a step back from the type of personal, ethically grounded involvement she experienced as part of the Peace Corps, and was required to embrace a more detached methodology. If *Culture, Scarcity, and Maternal Thinking* were to be re-written by Scheper-Hughes today, I believe that it would be significantly less non-partisan and much more subjectively oriented, in tune with her view that "the work of anthropology demands an explicit ethical orientation to 'the other'" (*Primacy*, 418). Thus, a new version would probably demonstrate a hybrid of anthropological objectivity and Peace Corp moral and ethical obligation, taking the field of anthropology and using it as a way to enact social and political change. Rather than subjecting her early anthropology to a figurative *a mingua*, she would probably go back and save it from neglect.

What is important to consider is the underlying problem in all of this; Scheper-Hughes is caught in an *individual* struggle, dealing with the clash between a *personal* call to action and a *professional* call towards remaining non-partisan. Rather than dealing with this struggle on an individual basis, she is trying to impress her views upon anthropology itself, calling for an alteration in the way that the branch of study is conducted and advocating a split between activism and objectivity that would divide the field in two. In her attempt to do so, she is, in a way, being unethical in her approach to the anthropological standard. To me, it does not seem possible to remain both objective and involved – mixed interests make it difficult for us to trust the credibility of an anthropologist's work. As a result, I believe that Scheper-Hughes' attempt is more or less futile – perhaps the fact that she never did rewrite her account goes to show that she recognizes the same.

