

Editor's Introduction

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I am pleased to present this special issue on Demographic Storytelling, guest edited by Professor Debra R. Kaufman. This is an issue that runs against expectation for it has called upon social researchers who normally let the numbers they have crunched do the talking, while the number cruncher—the demographer—remains largely invisible.

We who work in ethnography and narrative used to be a bit like that. Basing ourselves on the idea that we could let readers sit on our shoulders and see what we have seen, understand what we have understood, and share our interpretations, we largely left ourselves in the shadows. In the best traditions of *verstehen* sociology and cultural anthropology, we put our subjectivity and personal prejudices on the shelf and sought to look at the world through the eyes and participate with those we observe and study. The mantra was simply: “I am a camera,” a very good camera, if we are good at what we do, but only a camera. The attention was to be on the data.

That presumption was challenged by what was once called the “new” or “post-modern ethnography.”¹ As James Clifford, one of the champions of that new ethnography, argued nearly thirty years ago, that the work of ethnographers “decodes and recodes,” and their “writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of ‘something made or fashioned,’” for they are not simply observers, or even participant observers; they are *interpreting observers*. But those interpretations are not unanchored; who we are and what we have been very much plays a crucial role in what we see and how we describe it. It cannot be separated from what kind of a camera we are. As Mary Pratt, another new ethnographer reminds us, “personal

¹ All these quotations come from *Writing Culture* edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

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narrative persists alongside objectifying description in ethnographic writing.” Quotations are often staged by the quoter, scenes framed by the observer, facts emerge only in the context of some point of view.

In this issue, Debra Kaufman has asked demographers of Jewish life to reflect along the same lines, seeking to show how their biographies and the ways their lives have been shaped inevitably affect the interpretations they have made of the data at which they have chosen to look. Numbers alone, it turns out, do not tell the whole story. Demographers tell the story as they see fit, as they are capable of telling it because of who they are, not only because of what they have analyzed.

When Kaufman raised these questions at a demography conference we both attended, they resonated with me for it seemed to me the field of Jewish demography had long tried to overlook the person of the demographer in favor of looking only at the tables that he or she produced. But when I saw, for example, Israeli demographers generally seeing the numbers of Diaspora Jewry telling a story of Jewish decline and assimilation, while their Diaspora counterparts commonly found an opposite narrative, I realized that one could not ignore who was collecting and looking at the data. But that, as the articles in this collection suggest, was only a small part of the story.

It has taken a good deal of time to prepare this issue. Getting demographers to write against type, to be self-reflective about who they are, is not always easy. Teasing out the implications of what they then tell us is even harder. Debra Kaufman has labored hard and long to do that, and the results are before you in these pages, and have for many of you been online even earlier. Her telling introduction to the whole issue follows these prefatory remarks.

The journal goes on, always looking for quality work. Future issues will bring a wide array of new articles, and one set about which I am particularly excited: a discussion of Jewish music and viewed through the prism of social science. Stay tuned.