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There's a First-Time for Everything

My comments today are in celebration of Rich and Sally and their contributions to knowledge and, more importantly, to the art of producing knowledge.

I've only known the Prices for 17 years, a not-inconsiderable 45 percent of my time on earth. When I met them, Sally had just finished *Paris Primitive* and Rich had just testified before the Inter-American Court for Human Rights and was about to publish *Travels with Tooy*. As the "young'un" in the room, I want to reflect for a moment on some firsts, some lasts, and the cycle of the Prices' works and lives, and share some of my memories and gratitude for them.

They witnessed lots of my firsts. They were godparents (as Sally called it) to my first publication—yes, it was a book review in *NWIG* and it was a big deal to me at the time. They patiently read and responded to the worried emails about getting into and then surviving grad school. They knew Landon and me when we met, and were one of the reasons we did meet – and then, a few years later, they watched us get married. They watched us have kids. They knew me when I was an ambitious and naïve undergrad, and then watched me make decisions, saw me experience tragedy, and observed move after move (was it 5 times?) across the country in search of A Place For Me in Anthropology.

Some notable firsts for Sally. She was in first cohorts: first, as a member of the first Radcliffe class to get a Harvard diploma, in 1965. Then, in 1981, as one of the first doctorates from Johns Hopkins Anthropology. Sally's first article (retitled without her permission) "Indian Summer" in the *Radcliffe Quarterly* in 1966. Her first solo book, *Co-Wives and Calabashes* in 1984. And all of those personal firsts, which are nothing small or domestic or insignificant: the first time she joined Rich in Martinique, the first time they went to Saamaka, their first child (Niko), their first daughter (Leah), the grandchildren, the greatgrandchildren. All those milestones in the life of a person, a woman, a wife, a mother, a scholar trying to get something important done.

They worked to differentiate their scholarship while remaining the closest of collaborators, living what they wrote to us on our wedding day: "times change, love endures." Even their separate, individually-authored works are imbued with the essence of the life they built together. So, if "Art is History's nostalgia," (which is me quoting Rich quoting Derek Walcott) then perhaps we might say, Sally is Rich's nostalgia and vice versa, Rich is Sally's nostalgia. They are each other's means for living, as well as remembering.

Water and its special meanings surface again and again in Rich's work. "Looking out at the calm Caribbean through our breadfruit tree, life is good," Rich wrote to me in Tucson in 2011. In his memoir, he writes, "I feel enormously privileged to have lived much of my life next to the sea, with a view of the waves from my bed or hammock, now reminding me daily of deceased poet friends [...] for all of whom the sea is history."

Writing at the beginning to Sally Hamlin from Martinique in 1962, perhaps Rich felt the weight of a few important firsts happening right then. “As we sat rocking under the stars, I thought of how nice it is to have something you feel you can do well, and I slowly realized how I am beginning to think of myself as an anthropologist. It’s a strange and pleasant feeling to realize for the first time that maybe you’ve got a *métier* that is already somewhat within your control.”

Years later, as masters of those *métiers*, they moved back to that place and came to feel that being freelancing anthropologists from the edges of the French empire was a kind of first for anthropology. As they wrote at that time, “Our stepping outside of this pervasive pattern of academic anthropological culture, and settling as residents in a Martiniquan community where we had first done fieldwork twenty-five years before, presented both special challenges and special opportunities for something we love—committing what Geertz has called ‘the ethnographical act.’”

Rich mentions a number of other big firsts in his memoir and elsewhere: Traveling to Saamaka. Becoming a father. Starting the program at Johns Hopkins. In 1982, “living in a standard Dutch house in Oegstgeest, next door to Leiden, I was finally able to complete the first of my ethnographic histories, *First-Time*. (When we returned to Baltimore, Sally and I designed the complex page layouts by cutting pieces of typewritten text with an X-Acto knife and affixing them to boards.)” And then he writes. in 1990, “*Alabi’s World* was, in a way, my first deep dive into ethnographic history.” Which raises an interesting point. Rich’s first ethnographic history was *First-Time* and yet his first “deep dive” was *Alabi’s World*. Each was a first time. And that was the point. As he puts it: “Different historical or ethnographic situations lent themselves to different literary forms (and vice versa) and [...] the ethnographer or historian should face each society or period—or for that matter each potential book—in a new and newly problematized way, searching out or even inventing a literary form that did not come preselected or ready-made.”

Another big first came recently, in 2024, when Rich and Sally made an unexpected return. (At least I didn’t expect it.) After having been expelled from Suriname in 1986 and subsequently threatened during their activist work on behalf of the Saamaka, including testifying to the Inter-American Court in 2007, it was hard to imagine their return to Saamaka. “By publishing details of that court case and in various other writings about the civil war, about Suriname’s subsequent transformation from dictatorship to narcocracy, and about that nation’s historical neglect and oppression of its Maroon and Indigenous peoples, I was making a safe return to Suriname even less imaginable for us.” Like Rip Van Winkle, however, they found themselves in a time capsule, waking up bravely in a Suriname that was hard to recognize. In their article on the trip, they describe the nostalgia, part memory, part joy, part pain, all a life seen in the long view, a togetherness of youth and age in the arc of passing time.

Rich and Sally are always following up, always keeping or renewing relations, always interested in the next chapter. And Rich continually reminds us that the next chapter does not always follow in chronological order. *Travels with Tooy* is written forwards and backwards, and in the divine and timeless times and places of the Wenti. Rich excavated *The Convict and the Colonel* and demonstrated the postcarding of the past and followed up with the latest twists. And Sally

took on the task of translating it into French so the people portrayed in the book could read it. For Rich and Sally, discovery is everywhere and the story is infinite.

And there are also last times. “I’m Rich and Sally’s last student,” I found myself telling Laurent Dubois a few years ago when I started a postdoc at UVA. “That’s ... dark,” I remember him saying. But it’s also true.

And there’s a dark edge to discovering history and culture, to discovering something that no longer exists or is no longer totally recognizable apart from pieces that feel like dreams. This kind of sensitive work is what Rich and Sally pioneered. This is why that now-ancient manifesto, *Writing Culture*, brought up *First-Time* on page 7 as Jim Clifford realized that the discipline’s subjective turn was underway.

The Prices are my teachers and I admire them. Shortly after graduating, Jalane Schmidt let me sit in on some of her classes at UVA and she privately explained to me, “You’ve studied at the feet of the masters.” And yet, they were always human to me: always real, honest, and the most thoughtful and responsive of mentors.

There’s a sense of “last” here too. Not to be too “dark,” but rather nostalgic, visualizing the arc of passing time. What is it like to be the last to sit at the feet of the elders? We like to think of our role models as immortal. And, in a sense, they are. We can’t banish their voices from our minds; they are our interlocutors for the rest of time. “Be a voracious reader,” Sally told me, so I took a book with me everywhere I went for the next two decades. “Keep your head down,” I hear Rich saying to me every day as I sit down at my desk.

It is always to them and with them that we write and we think. We grow with and through them, because and sometimes despite of who came before us, who shaped us. The enduring point, apart from love, of Rich and Sally’s lives and scholarship is that it is a responsibility to sit at the feet of the elders. It is an inheritance and a joy and a burden and an honor.