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A Truer Story

I want to thank the organizer, Kris Lane, for kindly inviting me to speak today. It's a pleasure and a privilege to take part in this gathering of the Rich and Sally Price faithful. Sally and Rich have kept faith with me through many years, years over which they had more than their share of professional adversity but remained always astonishingly intellectually active and true to their friends and former students. The debt I owe them cannot be counted but I hope it will be evident in my remarks today that their influence still echoes through the academic projects that have kept me busy most lately. I want to say a little bit about my newest book project and then turn the focus to Rich and Sally's place as two of cultural anthropology's premier storytellers and narratologists.

In my latest book project, I examine the place of narratives in today's antitrafficking and antislavery activism, the self-styled "new abolitionism." The new abolitionists are global north civil society activists, aided by law enforcement and journalistic allies, who profess dedication to the cause of "ending slavery in our lifetimes." Any study of the narratives of trafficking survivors, witnesses and responders must respond to the questions raised by anti-antitrafficking skeptics, who posit that both the existence of a massive human trafficking crisis and the law enforcement response that it justifies seem to rest on skimpy evidence. Controversy also swirls around how antitrafficking activists can call themselves "abolitionists" while also keeping prison abolitionists, border abolitionists and sex worker rights activists at arm's length. My sympathies lay with the skeptics, even as my task as an anthropologist is always to understand the persuasive power of antitrafficking storytelling in the eyes of its believers.

As documentarian Barry Stevens says, "You should let the truth get in the way of a good story. Because in doing so you come away with a true story." I wish Stevens had said "truer" instead of "true," considering that untruths can much more easily and reliably be revealed than truths can. He also could have helpfully said something about *how* you move from a good story to a truer story.

To my mind, the path from a good story to a truer story begins by distrusting your first intuitions, actively jeopardizing your good stories by confronting them with inconsistent facts. Minimally, getting a truer story involves jettisoning untruths and abandoning or modifying those early hunches that prove inaccurate or inadequate. Of course, approaching storytelling ethnographically also involves paying close attention not only to the content of narratives, but also to the processes of their formation within communities. What do the stories mean to the people who tell them? Part of your job as an anthropologist is of course to pay attention to what you are hearing, to listen to what's being told to you, and then to reflect on what that reveals about the standpoints of the storytellers. A third move is to resist interpretive closure, holding

back as long as possible from declaring “this I know,” and indeed asking whether the question before you even demands that you commit to one account or interpretation versus another. In my experience, more may be revealed about the operation of power by keeping a plurality of aims and determinants in sight instead of reducing the narratives of the powerful to one goal or ideology. Truer stories may thus be "both/and" more often than they are "either/or."

I say these things in part to raise questions of narratological method but also because I first grappled with questions like these in the seminars that I took as a graduate student in cultural anthropology at Johns Hopkins, and particularly, as I recall, in Rich Price’s “Being an Anthropologist” research methods seminar. Whether through careful exegeses of recent ethnographies or classic texts, or more loosely jointed discussions prompted by Rich sharing segments of his Saamaka field notes, one point shone through: we hold a basic professional commitment to account for *how* we know what we claim to know as anthropologists.

My study of today’s antislavery narrative is at the awkward early stage where I have more good hunches than verified accounts. My initial hypotheses still stand in need of being corrected and amplified through confrontation with what antitrafficking believers say about the stories and what their telling signifies to them. All this, in the course of time, will become part of my new book.

Just as relevant to my developing study of today’s antislavery narratives is how Rich and Sally have for years been framing their problems as stories, and often, as stories about stories, with the challenges that this poses of moving from a “good story” to a “truer story.”

Homing in on just one aspect, bear with me in voicing some thoughts and questions about storytelling and narratology, à la Price.

In *First-Time*, Rich claims that “narrative (straightforward storytelling) ranks rather low” among Saamaka forms of historical knowledge transmission. Even so, he credits Saamaka elders as “voices,” individuates them with names, biographies, and clan-specific outlooks, and places their genealogies, proverbs, prayers, and exegeses of song lyrics, place names, and drum signatures in translation in a textual tier right above his own commentaries on the corresponding events in early Saamaka history. It has been said by more than one person, in more than one way, that there is nothing more theoretical than ethnography. I think that no text exemplifies this better than *First-Time*. By highlighting and to the degree possible respecting the distinct forms that Maroon history-keeping takes, Rich recognizes and counters the potential for epistemic violence in the act of ethnohistorical translation. At the time of its publication, *First-Time* arguably did more than any book since *The Myth of the Negro Past* to put the lie to the slander that non-Westerners are “people without history.” And it does even more than that, not only helping preserve Saamaka founding history but shedding light on that history’s place as a de facto charter of Saamaka identity. Far from reifying storytelling, then, or falsely universalizing the “power of stories,” *First-Time* contextualizes the keeping of historical knowledge as both a contingent product of culture and a constitutive building block of Maroon identity.

Ahead of its time also, and equally still a model for my developing book project, is the multidisciplinarity of the Prices’ sources and theories, nowhere better exemplified perhaps than

in Sally's *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. Sally juxtaposes "the knowledge and views of academics, curators, and professional dealers" with content drawn from "movies, talk shows, newspaper reviews, popular magazines, and dinner-party conversations." Her relentless focus on power, inequality, and epistemic alienation when Western dealers, experts, and buyers commodify, decontextualize, and reconceptualize non-Western art "to fit into the economic, cultural, political, and ideological needs of people from distant societies" provides an ethico-political spine to what might otherwise look like pastiche. Recognizing *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* as a pathbreaking application of humanities-derived methods of comparison and close reading beyond works regarded as canonical by bourgeois, Eurocentric scholarship, I would be very interested in hearing Sally share her thoughts on jumping meta-disciplinary boundaries between the humanities and social and cultural analysis.

Equally ahead of its time has been Sally and Rich's insistence that, for anthropologists, "the story" is never a single story but always has multiple strands. The multiplicity of voices is perhaps nowhere more cacophonous than in their marvelously messy *Equatoria*. In that book, the Prices print their collective diary of a weeks-long trip to gather art and information for a projected ethnographic museum in Cayenne on its righthand pages, facing quotations printed on the book's lefthand pages from a wide variety of travel writers, observers of Antillean cultural life, visual and museum anthropologists, popular cultural publications, colonial administrative edicts, and much more, interspersed with Sally's lovingly detailed sketches of Maroon objects that would end up in the permanent collection of Musée Régional de Guyane. By turns cheeky, confessional, reflective, and elegiac, the *Equatoria* diary pages give detailed attention to the circumstances under which Maroon art objects are collected by Westerners and thus speak volumes concerning the inequalities masked by the museum display of those objects. Its quotation pages present a chronicle of miscomprehensions reinforced by the narratives and interpretations that surround non-Western objects in the hands of Western collectors. Am I merely stating the obvious, I wonder, to ask if the mess is part of the message of *Equatoria*? The book testifies both to the mess the Guiana Maroons were in at the time of the book's writing — war-torn, geographically uprooted and scattered, and plagued by economic insecurity and layers of racist disdain — while leaving the words of anthropologists, journalists, travel writers, and colonial officials a congeries, a jumble of mutually inconsistent assertions, embarrassing revelations, and Othering fantasies. In any case, I can only wonder and marvel at the hours you two must have spent clipping newspapers, photocopying pages, and filing away possible items for inclusion on the lefthand pages of *Equatoria*.

I could say and ask so much more about the Prices' storytelling practices, particularly in relation to the candystore of genres in which they have written over the years. But conversation is really what we're gathered for today, and thus I am happy to leave it to Sally, Rich, and our other distinguished speakers to say more about the Price story.