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The Writer as Anthropologist: Teaching Ethnography Through Literature

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Abstract

Literature and ethnographic writing have at least one thing in common - they are both about 'putting things to paper'. As observed by Clifford Geertz in his *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Geertz, 1988), the concern with how ethnographic texts are constructed has for a long time been considered irrelevant, even 'unanthropological'. As a consequence, important aspects concerning the style, imagery and metaphor of great anthropological works have not been included in the standard teaching curricula. This paper tries to see things from a reverse Geertz perspective: how can contemporary prose be used to expand ethnographic knowledge, as well as refresh the sometimes stale scientific discourse. The few chosen examples serve as illustrations of the great potential of fiction storytelling to challenge dominant modes of ethnographic writing, and to teach anthropological concepts and ideas.

Keywords: ethnographic writing, literature, faction, experimental prose.

Introduction

In April 1984 a seminar was held at the School of American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Ten researchers dealing with ethnography, cultural theory and textual criticism sought to reinterpret cultural anthropology's past, and open up its future prospects, especially regarding the way ethnographic discourse is constructed and disseminated.

The post-product of this meeting was a collection of articles, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, published in 1986 (Clifford and Marcus 1986), which represents the most detailed and introspective analysis of the disciplinary conventions of ethnography in terms of its (in)ability to 'translate' modes of thought through writing to date. Grown as a reaction to the conventions of ethnographic realism, this group aimed to challenge the American and British ethnographic traditions that defined the position of ethnographic realism as *the* genre for anthropology, i.e. as *the* 'literary institution' serving positivist scientific goals. One of the findings of this seminar, and of the collection that followed, was thus the recognition not only of the existence, but also of the necessity of the author's presence in the text. This meant investing less efforts in a credible, dry and objective presentation of 'facts', including more personal, auto-reflexive points of view instead. It also gave potential for varied stylistic innovations, where the presence of metaphors, allegories and poetic descriptions of landscapes and people would not only be allowed, but also praised.

In 2011, the journal *Cultural Anthropology* celebrated the 25th anniversary of the publication of this landmark collection, with a special on line curated edition. Through a collaboration with the literary journal *American Short Fiction,* it published "Literature, Writing and Anthropology", a publication consisting of five anthropological articles and five works of fiction, interviews and a recorded lecture. The editors stated in the introduction,

> Conventionally, we have relied on truth as the fundamental distinguishing factor between fiction and other genres. Fiction was thought to be invented, while the social sciences, journalism and memoir presented accounts of ostensibly real people, places and events. Looking at the intersection of literature, writing, and anthropology today, clearly this simple binary is eroding, (Byler and Dugan, 2011).

The 'alarm bell' warning on the crisis of ethnographic writing in the 1980s has obviously provoked a methodological reflection, and more importantly, an epistemological one. However, many felt not horror, but relief, an immense burden taken off the ethnographers' chest, that everything written down is not expected to directly capture reality, but that it can also create it, shading light upon multiple, sometimes even conflicting

truths. In terms of style this meant injecting literary features to ethnographic texts, such that include academically non-standard imagery and introspection.

Fiction vs. Faction

An important endorsement of such relaxation of claims of authenticity and the 'eroding of the binary' (art vs. science) came from a high place, from a eminent name in interpretative anthropology such as Clifford Geertz. In *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as an Author,* published in 1988, he argued that anthropological writing has, and in fact always had, a distinctive literary character, that has helped it achieve credibility, or that has been responsible for the lack of it. More than piling meticulously registered and presented facts, and far more than presenting theoretical arguments, it is exactly the writing talent of anthropologists, says Geertz, that makes us believe that they have "been there" – that they have established a contact with cultures that are beyond our experience, and far from our grasp (Geertz, 1988, 16). Thus, ethnographies are crafted representations, like fiction, though not fictional. He even gave a name to this new hybrid style - "faction", imaginative writing about real people in real places.

The "faction" produced since has multiple facets. It comes in a form of ethnographic novels, biographies, ethnographic poetry, memoirs and various hybrid forms that defy categorization (e.g., Behar 1993, 1996, 2008; Daniel and Peck 1996; Diamond 1986; Jackson 1986; Stoller 1989). Two recent collections of such works show, however, that although anthropology and social sciences in general in the last few decades have become much more open to literary forms, these genres are still far from being mainstream. *Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing*, published in 2017 (Pandian and McLean 2017), tries to invigorate creativity of contemporary anthropologists, through promoting fiction, memoir, poetry and cinema, as relevant ethnographic expressions. Another one, *Fiction as Method* (Shaw and Reeves-Evison 2017), a result of a conference held at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2015, published in 2018, is treating stories, novels, songs and theories not as 'unreal', but as actual things in the world, that should thus be taken into serious consideration by social scientists. Although being important gathering points of the like-minded from different fields, these collections nevertheless have an aura of an unconventional approach, endorsed by a minority. In the case of the former, the contributions are even explicitly described, both by the cover reviewers and by the editors themselves, as "experimental ventures in ethnographic writing", "boldly experimental", "a demonstration of the value of what the editors term experiment" (Shaw and Reeves-Evison 2017). "Ethnographies will only be fairly assessed when the development of what amounts to a critical sense for the form, as well as the manifest content of ethnographic discourse becomes a part of routine professional practice", wrote Marcus and Cusham in 1982 (1982, 66), an achievement that seems as far from being completely unlocked.

A Reverse (Teaching) Perspective

A way to popularize the afore mentioned hybrid genres, would be to include them in standard curricula, courses and interdisciplinary workshops that concern ethnographic writing, thus encouraging students to use and develop creative penning skills, something that at this time they might find inconsistent with academic discourse. A hesitation might exist on the side of ethnography or anthropology teachers as well – the fear of, as Geertz puts it, a "corrosive relativism" that would turn these disciplines into "a mere game of words, as poems and novels are supposed to be" (Geertz 1988, 2). He rejects these concerns as unreasonable, but his self-confidence and easiness is something that many find difficult to attain.

However, a 'reverse Geertz' methodology might be an interesting way to interbreed literature and ethnography: along with promoting members of one's own professional niche whose writings defy existing academic expectations, to boldly step in the area of 'fine' literature itself, and look for writers whose works might be not labelled as ethnography, but that are still 'ethnographically informed'. A rare book that offers practical advice for anyone ambitious to expand on their ethnographic writer's talents in this sense is Kirin Narayan's (2012) *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in The Company of Chekhov*. An experimental genre itself, it is a few things at once: a personal guide and a teacher's manual, that includes autobiographical bits and pieces, biographical details on Chekhov and literary analysis of his works. Described on the book's back cover by the above mentioned George Marcus as "balm for the loneliness and torment of the ethnographic writer", it offers yet another 'therapeutic', but also very practical venue of turning ethnographic writing into what the author labels as "creative non-fiction". She does this through reading Chekhov as ethnographer, referring to his nonfiction accounts of 19th century Russia (most notably "The Sakhalin Island", his investigation of the prison conditions in Siberia), but also his stories, letters and plays. Not only that this fictitious works at times contain equally relevant ethnographic data as the ones labelled as non-fiction, they can also do something of greater importance – show

an ethnographer how to describe, interpret and present places, persons and events in a way that combines stories with ideas, narratives with arguments, and imagination with facts.

If we recognize that there is something called 'ethnographically informed' prose, written not by ethnographers, but by writers, then 'creatively powered' or 'imaginative' ethnography could be its counterpart. But how to teach young students this 'ethlit', showing them the various ways literature can improve their understanding and practice of good ethnographic writing? Here are few exemplary genres and corresponding books, that can serve as useful tools in accomplishing this task.

Biographical Fiction: *Nine Nights* By Bernardo Carvalho

August 2nd, 1939. A young American ethnologist by the name of Buell Quain, commits suicide in the Amazonian forest, under mysterious circumstances. This true story remains relatively unknown, even among members of his profession, which is curious having in mind that he was not some marginal figure, but one of the best students of his generation, mentored by Franz Boas, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict.

Bernardo Carvalho, a Brazilian author, who has no direct professional link to anthropology, decides to break the silence and tell the story through a novel that combines documentary data, fictional statements of people who came in touch with Quain during his field research among the Brazilian tribes, and a personal investigation bordering on a detective quest (Carvalho 2007). The main narrative is an attempt to reconstruct events that led to Quain's suicide deep in the Brazilian rain forest, while a second one, written in italic, consists of mysterious letters written by an engineer who talked to Quain during nine consecutive nights prior to the tragic incident (hence the title of the book, *Nine Nights*). These at the same time present testamentary messages, left to be discovered by someone who after many years would risk reopening up the sensitive case.

The genre of fictional biography could be used in teaching ethnographic writing and ethnography in general in multiple ways. The manner in which the missing links and the blank spaces in the documentary stories are usually filled in such works - through sometimes blurred recollections, multiple perspectives, intuition, fantasy and even dreams - may suggest a way to deal with such inconsistencies in our own ethnographic work, without necessarily treating them as argumentative failures, but as inherent properties of the quest to make sense of the world. In the case of this particular book, since it retells an important, but generally not well known episode in the history of the discipline, it could inform the student's notion of the process of inclusion or exclusion of names and events from the standard chronology of its development, and the potential reasons for these occurrences. It is practically an example of meta-research and an auto-referential ethnography, where the author, in order to write the novel, has to re-research and re-live the exact circumstances through which his predecessor has gone through. And in doing so to be very cautious not to lose one's reason and common sense, a threat that hangs over the ethographers' heads more commonly than we are ready to admit.

Memoir: *Educated* by Tara Westover

As a child, Tara, born in 1986, had never visited a doctor. Being home schooled, she set foot in a public classroom for the first time when she was 17. While living with her survivalist Mormon family at a small Idaho farm, she performed physically demanding tasks at her father's junk yard, and assisted her mother, a self-taught midwife, in delivering babies and preparing balms and concoctions. A difficult decision to leave everything behind has taken her to Harvard and Cambridge, and to writing this best-selling autobiography.

As a genre, memoirs have all the necessary qualities pertinent to relevant ethnographic sources. They are first-person life stories, that nevertheless speak about the historical and cultural context in which they are rooted. In case of famous persons, of whom there are a treasury of background information and at times conflicting biographies, the personal memoir can bring out the potential differences in reconstructing an individual life, from one's own perspective, and the perspective of others. Issues of selective memory, confabulation, exaggerations, lying by omission or minimizations, can challenge the notion of 'objectivity' of our own field interviews or informants' life stories.

Moreover, memoirs like *Educated* (Westover 2018), written by members of isolated communities that are difficult to penetrate by outsiders, offer a valuable look into the social structure, hierarchies, beliefs and practices that may remain invisible even to a researcher that might be provided access and trust. Thus, they can be used as a research source when dealing with a particular community, certainly without taking the perspective of the author at face value.

Tara's courageous decision to reinvent herself gives a coming-of-age quality of the text, showing however how difficult are such radical steps for members of any traditionalist family or community. It may shed light on the unspoken motives of such people that we often face in the field - their lack of trust in official institutions, their consecutive returns to abusive parents or partners, and lifelong emotional scars. Not many of them will leave articulately written memoirs such as Westover's, but through our research of their life stories we might serve as the 'vessels' for bringing out and recording their narrations, void of judgment, in a way that would best reflect their perspective.

Novel: *Witness* by Juan Jose Saer

Published in 1983, this book defies classification. On one hand, it is a historical novel, taking place during an event that will change the world forever - the discovery and the subsequent conquest of the Americas. On other hand, it is a psychological novel, about a young prisoner who is left unharmed by a cannibal tribe, so that, once freed, he can witness everything that he saw. It is also in a sense a very anthropological book, since it confronts the values of the two worlds - the 'primitive' and the 'civilized' one, locating the main protagonist somewhere in between this fluid territory, that moves every time the reader thinks that Saer has finally defined the moral and cultural coordinates of each of these worlds. In the most general sense of the term, this is also a political novel, since it re-investigates social values, in a way that makes eating human flesh seem 'logical' and socially justified compared to the conquests and violent destructions of whole nations and cultures.

The style in which the book is written is reminiscent to early ethnographic writings on distant people and cultures, created by people who were not trained to make detailed field notes, but were nevertheless aware that the face to face interaction with the 'Others' should be registered in as much detail as possible. When after a decade the unnamed Witness is finally freed, he comes back home, learns to write and joins a theatre group in order to retell his experiences. His narratives however are often peppered with hyperboles, that go unnoticed by the public, guided by its own will for thrill and excitement.

In ethnographic teaching context the book could inspire important discussions on the relation between the ethnographer as a 'storyteller', and the potential temptation, that is valid especially for the early stages of the discipline, for modelling a certain study according to the dominant paradigm, or simply according to the expectations of mentors and colleagues. Mead's classic *Coming of Age in Samoa* and the criticism it drawn on the grounds of its findings being tailored according to the expectations of Mead's mentor Franz Boas, could serve as an interesting point for comparison.

The book also challenges the idea of who is the one who controls ethnographic knowledge – the tribe keeps the witness/the ethnographer alive for its own purposes, presenting him with an array of information that might be also tailored to reflect a certain reality about their culture, in a way they want to be perceived by the outside world. It is again the tribe that decides if and when the witness is ready to be freed – only when he is so immersed in their stories, that he cannot make a difference between fiction and truth.

Short Story: "The Oracular Vulva" by Jeffrey Eugenides

The story, included in the first collection of the Pulitzer winning novelist (Eugenides 2017), opens with Dr. Peter Luce, a famous sexologist - expert on human hermaphroditism, in a West Papua jungle, studying the gender roles of the fictional Dawat tribe. His long-time dominant theory, that gender identity is established at the age early age of two, has recently been disproved by a younger, female colleague. At this low point of his carrier, we find him in a tent, on a sleepless night, being harassed both by a huge mosquito, and a ten-year-old Dawat, who is trying to reach for Luce's shorts. The kid has been after him for three straight weeks, and for a good reason - according to the tribe's customs, he is obligated to sexually gratify his elders. Dawat boys are encouraged, even coerced into fellating the older members of the tribe.

"You ever hear of a thing called professional ethics, kid?", rhetorically asks Luce at one point, while the boy's eyes fill with tears. Their silent duel continues until there is only one hour left until the morning cry of the monkeys. Luce suddenly becomes exhausted and sick, with his nerves shot. The boy struggles with the mechanics of the zipper, but suddenly figures it out. "And it's very dark. And Dr. Peter Luce is open-minded. And there's nothing you can do, after all, about local customs", read the last lines.

The story as a narrative genre is void of redundancy. It is 'concentrated prose' that, due to its brevity, often starts *in medias res*, throwing the readers into the heat of a situation. In formal terms it is a very useful teaching writing

tool, since it demonstrates the importance of focus and elimination of non-vital information. Saying more with less is as crucial in ethnographic texts, as it is in fiction. A good short story is an entire world in miniature, a made-up, but at the same time a very spirited realm of characters and settings. They feel 'authentic' even though they are not meticulously described - in fact it is exactly due to the lack of details that we feel stimulated to fill in the gaps, and imagine what is left out. In ethnographic terms this goes against the desire for a total coverage of the researched context, it is a 'thin' description compared to the quest for a 'thick' one. However, the limitations set by short prose can result with lighter, up to the point and more transparent texts, where, metaphorically speaking, the tree (the concrete research problem) is not overshadowed by a forest of words.

All these elements apply to "The Oracular Vulva", but content-wise it is much more than an example of the features of the short prose genre. In a satirical, but also in a quite radical way, the story examines the clash between the theoretical stances of a high-brow white, liberal, male anthropologist, who has built his whole carrier on the ideas of cultural relativity and the very practical judgment he has to make in a context that treats sex between adults and minors not only as non-controversial, but as a norm. A total immersion in the researched culture might presuppose doing things that we might find repugnant, or simply 'bad'. Great social pressure, combined with our own lack of integrity and self-control, might result with decisions that might hurt our interlocutors, or leave us with a feeling of shame and guilt. This story could thus be a supplement for the typical field-work manual, initiating discussions on the thin line between respecting the culture of others, and misusing it.

Conclusion: The Teaching Value of *Ethlit*

This article highlighted some of the ways 'fine' literature can, and should be used in teaching ethnographic writing, as well as ethnology and cultural anthropology in general. Although it focuses on selected prose genres, the list can be extended to include poetry, drama and creative non-fiction works, such as personal essays, travelogues and diaries. Elements of each genre, and the content of each corresponding example, are examined on the base of their potential value thereof. It invites reading and re-reading classical and contemporary literary works, especially such written by indigenous and minority authors, as a source for non-traditional ethnographic data, that could reveal possibly neglected perspectives and voices. They could also serve as an excellent discussion platform, on sensitive issues that might not be covered by mainstream textbooks and teaching materials (religious or other extremism, violence, class, race and gender biases etc.).

The poetics of these texts, when incorporated in ethnographic works, infuse them with colours, scents, feelings, and lived or imagined experiences. This might lessen the 'scholarly', authoritative tone, but what is gained is far more important - the humanness of the ethnographic enterprise, which is not only about 'systematic study' or 'description' of people, but also about an immersion into their worlds, which through writing become our own.

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