



The Uncommon Insights of Fiction and Anthropology: A Personal Note

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Abstract

Moving from an initial position of rejection of, or at least scepticism about, the sense of bringing together fiction and anthropology, the author, consonant with (by now well known) developments in the history of anthropology, recounts how for a number of reasons she unexpectedly changed her mind. She uses a case study from her own writing and experience to illustrate the relevance, insights, complexities and still-difficult issues of the relationship, taking us to the heart of anthropological theory.

Keywords

Narrative, Imagination, Truth, History of anthropology, Theory

Fiction and anthropology? Strange bed-fellows. After all fiction is the work of imagination, while anthropology, presumably a social science, empirical, reports on the real world. Yes, so I thought for many years.

But when I started to really *think* about it and to apply the open mind that is surely the first necessary quality of anthropologists some doubts slowly loomed into my consciousness. Was there perhaps something about narrative, in its many senses and varied applications that was faintly worth considering? Being interested in narrative and the sociology of knowledge, I had of course heard of such things, and classical and mediaeval literature, both of which I have always lived, theological and historical writers. ng too are full of narrative. In fact, as we now widely appreciate (see for example the retrospective overview in Finnegan [1] - so I knew it, or should have, already).

But with all that - how slow in the uptake - I did not really get it. Nothing to do with *me* or with *my* work. Fiction and anthropology I was convinced were and are two opposed spheres of knowledge, indeed of existence itself.

But now, like some others I wonder.

Not only have I found myself embroiled in the very thing I had dismissed (of which more a little later) but let's face it - the postmodernist folk have got something

right. What, after all, is the basis if an anthropologist's perception of reality? or anyone's? Have we not all read Berger and Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality*? Or other works in the anthropology of knowledge? Do dreams and that (equally invisible and unproven); entity 'the unconscious' not somehow convey a kind of grasp - or at least an alternative, possible, view - of the world? Might not poets arguably have as true and deep an understanding as the 'scientific' observer? Nowadays (not in the past) we might leap with joy onto a novel by one of the 'them' we purport to study as giving unique insight into 'the facts' of experience (the latter, blessedly, no longer an automatically dirty word in the social sciences). Why not the same for the careful participant observer, a *kind* of partial insider at the least, that is the anthropologist of him or herself?

I'd made such points about poets and about alternative world views often enough in my teaching and writ-

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ing - in *theory*. I wonder why it never occurred to me to apply it to myself.

But now Anthropology has moved on and even I had to take notice. *Writing Culture* [2], has shaken our ideas of objective ethnographical writing, auto-and reflexive-anthropology of the observer's detachment [3,4] and the concepts around wakened even anthropologists (with some important exceptions surprisingly slow to take it up) made us aware of the significance of story in creating reality and forging the self [5-9].

By now all this is well known and in the public domain. Several publishers have 'fiction' as a subsection in their Anthropology lists, the much-consulted Goodreads site has a goodly collection (not always fully accurate) headed 'Popular anthropology fiction books' and Lisa Wynn [10] gives us a fine list of some great examples of ethnographic fiction plus some perceptive observations. And yet the subject, and its examples, has not yet, as far as I know, made it into the main stream of anthropological theory, let alone the non-ethnographically grounded but nevertheless anthropologically insightful works - by which I mean works that bring insights in the ideas, feelings and acts of human beings (for what else was anthropology founded?).

So by now the field is indeed burgeoning and I need spend no more time in this widely accepted approach.

And yet, and yet - child of the western scientific revolution I want to ask what has happened to our devotion to 'truth'? To our responsibility to speak as the evidence leads us without fear or favor? To regard ourselves as exponents of an empirical method, leaving aside our own ore judging cues, assumptions and commitments to shoulder our responsibility to others, to tell it as it is?

Truth to tell I still find myself, despite these recent(ish) developments rather suspicious of ethnographic fiction. I see the point, but can't help regarding it as one of these post-modern self-indulgent navel-gazing alibis for never getting down to the hard grind (well it is hard work isn't it, even if enjoyable, or anyway satisfying, as well) of writing up the ethnography you've been funded to complete and, presumably, share with the world. I'm still a bit tempted to claim, self-righteously, that I, unlike these novelists ('novels'!) was puritanically moral, having published lots of (non-profit making of course) stuff about my fieldwork.

But now - I find myself in the middle of it. For, I have written and published a novel [11] - or rather not *myself* written but somehow been *given* it. Here, in my old age, is another field for my observing and reflecting.

How did it come about? Every year I visit New Zealand to see my daughter and granddaughter there. I find

it a liminal place of revelation and discovery - home but not home, up over and down under, a night that is at the same time day, place of new technology and old wisdom, part but not part of our oldening world.

Two years ago, in that place of becoming, neither the one nor the other (how anthropologists will recognize this condition), I started having a series of strong dreams. As an anthropologist, though not, I think, as a person, I had always taken dreams fairly seriously and knew (vaguely) that a few anthropologists such as the wonderful shamanic Barbara Tedlock had written about them. But these dreams were different. I can only describe them as 'power dreams', visions if you like. I thought of them at first as kind of non-dynamic, non-verbal, tableaux: Visual, for that is how we commonly conceptualize dreams. But now I see they are not the ordinary sensory perceptions but rather more intense nodes of *feeling*, ones that I felt had to be shared. And so - as I lay half-waking half-sleeping, liminally again, words seemed to gather, irrespective of my conscious will, coming inward from around the edges of my brain. The next morning I found they were ready to be written down as if from dictation. It was much the same process as when I was transcribing into writing the taped stories of my African fieldwork days. But for the novel I always remembered the words until I had a chance to transcribe them, then, once written I forgot them, totally. Though I recall the outline of the plot, the actual words on the page, now re-read a dozen times or more, are a constant surprise to me.

Seven weeks, some of them back in England and it was done. A chapter a night. The final, 50th, chapter came a little later. I think it was probably always there, I just was slow in seeing it waiting for me.

Now that the novel is published I read it with amazement. Because it comes from the long my nail out-of-time-and-space place in and around dreams, I feel in many ways that it is not mine but from some origin beyond me (an experience I hope in time to write about further). I also now see how surprisingly related it is to my academic work. Narrative - 'true' or not - and poetry, have always been among my central interests and publications (*Limba stories* and *story-telling*, *Tales of the city*, and *Oral poetry* for example). It is both surprising (but, looking back, *not* surprising) and satisfying to find myself unexpectedly a practitioner, a participant, as well as an observer.

As a number of reviewers have pointed out (but I did not realize while writing) the novel, partly autobiographical, grows out of, and echoes, my earlier work. One perceptive reviewer put it well - a surprise to me but then I saw that this was right:

'She has said that the words were dictated to her ready-

made from dreams. But only someone with her personality, background, knowledge and academic abilities could have dreams like this'.

It is also, like the African stories of my field research, notably oral, rhythmic, sonic (surely those echoes must have come through to me as I heard the wonders of great story-telling in a remote West African village, or, as I lay half-waking, the beats and cross-rhythms of drums in the early morning air). Also, as Karin Barber points out in a perceptive editorial review, it is in some ways a true *African* novel. For I find that have been, unawares, developing something of a new genre - or rather one that, like many African novels, stretches the boundaries to include in the one work elements of such (accepted) genres as novel, short story, mystic poetry, fantasy, autobiography, theology, myth and Dante-esque epic.

My experience has led me into further intellectual work on dreams and on the cross-cultural experience of the ethereal - whatever exactly that is: Terminology is a constant problem in such studies (discussed in the edited volume *Entrancement* [12] an edited volume with many keen and highly original anthropological essays with the University of Wales Press - braver than most! I had not realised there was so much serious interdisciplinary work on these subjects, highly pertinent to the subject and 'truth issues' in the relation of fiction and anthropology (for references and evidence see that volume). Much of this too is by hard-nosed scientists. Surprisingly there seems to be rather less directly by anthropologists than I would have expect (I know of some of course but would love to hear of more - anyone out there?)

A little more on the novel itself: I have always been interested in language and its poetic, so looking at the novel with fresh eyes, have noticed - as will also be evident to anyone who wishes to read, or even just momentarily glance at the text - that it often stretches conventional English language by using plentiful verbal, orthographic, and grammatical innovations, chosen to fit the rhythms of the dream-infused text. In its oral and sonic qualities, best appreciated in an audio version (planned) and closely related to its unique stylistic character, it builds both on my memories of the *feeling* of speaking school-learnt texts aloud, and on the experience of listening to Irish and African story-telling. So although a genuine novel - a love story, a parable - it also in this way too comes out of my anthropological, African and literary experience. Without that it could not have been written, and is thus, a novel, a true continuation of my academic work.

As an encapsulation of 'reality' (one of the novel's themes being the ambiguity between dream and reality) I now feel that, like other novels by anthropologists and (indeed) historians, that mine is indeed another way

of capturing and conveying the nature of our world as well as of the Irish and African worlds I have so gladly experienced in my personal and intellectual life. Is this less of a contribution to our anthropological understanding than carefully wrought field reports? I would love to have any responses on this subject both about the experience of writing/constructing/creating fiction, and the novels themselves. Also about the nature of dreams - has anyone else out there, apart from Coleridge and Milton, been inspired, either personally or in their observations of other peoples, by dreams leading into writing?

So - a new field of anthropology? In it he way yes, and growing fast.

But in another way it has long been with us. I remember that in 1959, early in my anthropology studies in Oxford, the ever-revered Professor Evans-Pritchard recommended Elenore Smith Bowen's *Return to Laughter* [13]. She too, that book's author, Laura Bohannon, had been a student at Oxford some years before with the same teachers, and was now a well-known anthropologist. So if I was recommended to read it as part of my graduate studies was there something there for me to learn?

But I discounted its importance, as in any way central to learning serious *anthropology*. It was surely just that she was a pet Institute product and a friend, I thought. And anyway everyone knew that many of the key Oxford Anthropologists at the time were literary people, graduates in English, and Catholic converts too what's more. So, of course, with all their wonderful insights and teaching, the odd eccentricity could be ignored and their Catholic mystifications and mythifications sidelined by a good Protestant Ulster girl like me. Reading novels was a nice hobby *but not* part of my curriculum.

Like a good student of the time I did however do what I was told. I read the book. And disliked it (still do). It is an intensely gloomy work that thoroughly put me off all such enterprises. I assumed they were all like that - ugh. Certainly I didn't think such a field (if it existed at all which, if I had then been asked, open-minded as I thought I was I would then without hesitation have hotly denied). I was of the same opinion later too, thinking such things were just for the far off 'po-mo weirdies' (as we called the then emerging postmodernist school) in America whence, or from France, everything odd seemed to come.

Fiction was unquestionably fun for off-time leisure. It could not possibly have anything relevant for an upright (uptight actually) academic empirical evidence-based left-hemisphered scientific practitioner like me.

So in the early 1960s I, like others, was sure that *Return to laughter* or any other fictional work - or even autobiographical account for that matter - p could and

should be disregarded. So by the same token should any other novels by anthropologists that I might happen to come across. I had more important things on my plate, I believed, as had every novice anthropologist of the time, like reading Durkheim (actually some of his writing seemed pretty speculative - novelistic? - to me even then) and wonderful ethnographies - a revelation - and Marcel Mauss and secretly - not then on the Oxford anthropological syllabus, absolutely not - Marx and Freud. I had come to anthropology from a degree in classical studies, steeped and thrilled in that enchanted literature, and felt, now moving into anthropology and nervously anticipating the practicalities of fieldwork, that even as an Irish person with a background of myth and magic I must put the irrelevant magic of such childish things behind me.

For many years I thought the same way. So no doubt do many anthropologists, even today. True, I did, encouraged by 'EP' turn back to my literary interests and focus in my fieldwork and to a large extent throughout my career, on story-telling: Narration - yes fiction, stories, myths [6,14,15], But it was the stories of *others* that I was engaged on, observed in as detached a way as I could, and participant only as audience. It had not occurred to me that *I*, the cool anthropologist, ever could or should *create* fiction or indeed might already in some sense be creating it.

But then novels, biographies, self-focused accounts and personal histories, fictional and non-fictional and mixed, began to crowd in on our shelves and, interested in narrative as I was, I could fail to notice the wonderful insights they gave us - into the concepts and processes of identity (of *identifying* I should better say), of experiencing, the cultural, construction of time and space, the cycles of history, and above all the consciousness of self. Yes reading the experiences if others can bring great wisdom.

But of myself! A person, an anthropologist?

That was when the experiences I recount above befell me and accepting them (not, as you can imagine, without

a struggle) changed not just my mind but my life.

And that, and the things that, as I have said, go with it, is why I am now convinced that the anthropology of fiction is now one of the most exciting, insightful, and challenging fields of anthropology, it is also, I believe, one that could - and I suspect already do - greatly inspire and draw in students today. I would urge that it is time to recognize all this as an explicit (and hopefully critically-analyzed) part of the anthropology curriculum. Long may such works flourish, within and beyond our discipline.

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