

# WRITING THE HUMAN

## Anthropological accounts as generic fragments

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### A chimera

What issues have been raised by these different contributions? We have asked a collection of anthropologists to reflect on their writing practices: What has been the focus of their concerns? These turn out to be diverse:

- How does one arrive at an object of study? How to know that one is discerning something and what one is discerning? (Anthony Stavrianakis, Paul Rabinow and Trine Mygind Korsby)?
- How does one conceptualise in relation to empirical experience? How discreet – as phenomena, as forms of life – are ‘concept’ and ‘experience’ (Veena Das)?
- How does one write in such a way as to allow for optimal openness and creative experimentation in the interplay between ethnographic data and theoretical insights (Morten Nielsen)?
- How does one write in such a way as to do justice to the particularities of the empirical case study while at the same time recognizing those human and individual universalities which any case will illustrate and to which the empirical case is to be theoretically aligned (Nigel Rapport)?
- How does one write in such a way that the nuances of the empirical material are not lost in the desire to achieve a coherent analysis (Thomas Hylland Eriksen)?
- How does one write so that the absurdities, the non-connectedness and the multiplicities of social reality are conveyed to the text (Nina Holm Vohnsen)?
- How does one maintain an authentic relationship between one’s writing and one’s fieldnotes, and between both and the parlance of one’s informants (Anthony Cohen)?
- How does one begin? How to write in such a way that the transition from nothing to something – from one’s own experience of other-than-this-text,

and from the reader's experience of other texts to this one – feel seamless (Kirin Narayan)?

- How does one achieve the state of mind, the work regime, whereby one can be assured of consistently being able to produce text, and for that text to be consistent with what was produced before (Helena Wulff)?
- How does one write in such a way as to take into account the historical specificities of the context in which one is writing – and so link the text to broader socio-political circumstance (Dominic Boyer)?
- How does one write in such a way as to allow different, fractured, and ill-coordinated temporalities to co-exist within one anthropological account (Bjørn Enge Bertelsen)?

The diversity of these concerns and their fundamental nature nicely evince the range of anthropology as a discipline, its ambition and possible perspicacity, but also its chimeral nature. ('Anthropology is a chimera or it is nothing', Ray Abrahams once proposed, amid a debate concerned with anthropology's paradoxical status as a generalising science whose methodology entailed a subjective craft (Ingold 1996:41). How 'chimeral', precisely? Because anthropology would know what it is to be human, and to write this knowledge, while the self-consciousness, the capacity for reflexivity and irony, of human being means that 'the human' is a moving target:

- To write the nature of the human is to change that nature's inexorable becoming. To write the nature of the human is to endeavour to step outside the situated character of that knowledge.
- To write the nature of the human is to corrupt a nature that is always particularistic in expression and beyond generalization and stereotypification.
- To write the nature of the human is to suggest that language is commensurate with experience and adequate to experience, and that that experience is of a coherent, non-random or chaotic quality.

A small book of 11 brief contributions concerned with the writing of anthropology would seem to raise questions about the discipline's very *raison d'être* and feasibility.

### **'You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on.'**

Citing a famous line from Samuel Beckett (1958) is not intended to make the situation of anthropology into a melodrama. The issues surrounding anthropology's chimeral nature – as a hybrid figure, a seeming contradiction-in-terms – are profound, certainly, but they are also quotidian, even banal. I mean that we keep writing. We deal with the apparently intractable difficulties of producing adequate and authentic texts by writing about them. And this in itself may be instructive.

It was René Descartes's discovery that while the concept of infinity was a well-established and even commonplace one, the concept actually *transcended* our human capacity to comprehend it. We have named and brought within a horizon of

thought something that exceeds our capacity to think it. We have an unmasterable relation to infinity: The concept contains more than can be humanly thought or conceptualised. It is the case, Descartes concluded, that we can humanly imagine states of being, or forms of being or levels of being, that we nevertheless cannot comprehend or apprehend. The ‘transcendent’ nature of anthropology was something that we addressed (in passing) in the introduction. We described processes of ‘entextualisation’ – turning experience into written text – that seemed to transcend the particular circumstances of their composition. And we described the seemingly unlikely juxtapositions of ethnographical data against analytical reflections as creatively transcending the disciplinary boundaries of anthropology and producing possibly genuine insights into the nature of human being (Rapport 2010). To return to transcendence here and to lay claim to that concept for anthropological writing is to say that our written texts might *point beyond themselves*, might open up spaces of genuine knowing *in spite of themselves*. In the same way that the concept of infinity – a quotidian usage – contains within itself insights that transcend the limits of our understanding – and so points beyond itself in profound ways – so might anthropological writing, writing that is on one level and for so many reasons (as above) impossible and incoherent, transcend its nature.

### Generic fragments

The Pre-Socratic Greek philosophers (such as Heraclitus and Pythagoras) gave us the model of the ‘fragment’ as a piece of work defined by its incompleteness (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988). As it is broken off from a larger whole, the fragment comes to imply other parts, sections or segments even when these are absent or have ceased to exist. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, however, the German Romantic writer Friedrich Schlegel challenged the idea that a textual fragment was simply the discursive debris of a lost whole. In a famous phrase, Schlegel argued that ‘[a] fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine’ (1991:45). While such texts do index (or even ‘eclipse’ Gell 1999) a multiplicity of voices, subject positions and inter-textual connections, they also come to exist as unique singularities, which articulate their own self-contained and almost monadic horizons. In this regard, the fragment is a fundamentally paradoxical figure, which ‘combines completion and incompleteness within itself’ (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988:50). It suspends the totality of which it was once an integral part but without forming a new and coherent entity in and of itself. Not unlike a cinematic montage that is composed by juxtaposing different framed images-in-movements cut off from their narrative structure (Nielsen 2013), the fragment is liberated, as it were, from a pre-given whole and presented alongside others without assuming an implicit order.

This collection of eleven diverse contributions has encouraged us to consider the anthropological account as a composition of fragments. As ethnographical material is turned into text – entextualised – it undergoes a series of irreversible transformations that are crucial for the making of a meaningful account. While it

may not be completely detached from its previous form, the relationship between the two becomes increasingly blurred. Indeed, to paraphrase Maurice Blanchot from his reflections on textual fragments, we may argue that ethnographic material is written up as a series of 'unfinished separations' (1995:58). But it is precisely by way of these dynamic and always pulsating intervals between ethnographic data and anthropological account that texts come to point beyond themselves. Descriptions of ethnographical phenomena will index, say, a sociocultural milieu, a number of interacting actors and a given set of practices occurring over time. This is the *extensive and metonymic* way in which an anthropological account points beyond itself. But it does also convey a broader horizon that is, paradoxically, buried even deeper within the text. In order for an anthropological account meaningfully to articulate the complexity of an ethnographic phenomenon, it is by necessity composed as a strategic reduction of that to which it is referring. Irrespective of the author's mastery of prose or the scope and magnitude of the published work, the written text is always less than its subject matter. But because an anthropological account is composed as an assemblage of 'unfinished separations' that traverse conceptual gaps, analytical lacunae and descriptive absences arising in and through the process of entextualisation, the reader is invited to stitch together new aesthetic configurations of significance. This is the *intensive and metaphoric* way in which the anthropological account points beyond itself.

Let us therefore consider the anthropological account as a *generic fragment* by itself: The anthropological text becomes a fragment the moment it is written. But the process of entextualisation is also a way of fixing an ethnographic truth, as it were, by subtraction and detachment. The text will invariably represent social life as somehow universally concretized, as if beyond particular circumstances and subjectivities. And it is in this instantiation, we might argue, that empirical phenomena become always less than themselves: The text articulates a social reality as it might be but which only exists as anthropological account. As such, the dynamics of social life come across as a fundamentally unfolded or eternally emergent reality.

But this is also why anthropological texts have the capacity to take the reader beyond the confines of their own conceptual domains. By immersing ourselves in the reading of anthropological accounts, we are provisionally offered the perspective of an ethnographic subject that is 'universal but limited' (Laruelle 2011:245). While an indexical connection is maintained to the ethnographic phenomenon, the generic but inherently fragmented commonality that is established with the text allows the reader to invest other conceptual domains with its properties. Indeed, as generic fragments, anthropological accounts fold themselves around other conceptual domains – without annihilating their specificity either.

## Literary insight

One of Edmund Leach's later provocations was that the purpose of social anthropology was 'to gain insight into other people's behaviour, or, for that matter, into their own'. 'Insight', he elaborated,

is the quality of deep understanding which, as critics, we attribute to those whom we regard as great artists, dramatists, novelists, composers (...). Anthropologists who imagine that, by the exercise of reason, they can reduce the observations of ethnography to a nomothetic science are wasting their time. (...) Social anthropologists are bad novelists rather than bad scientists. (1982:52–3)

‘Bad’ in the sense that we could do better were we to admit the fanciful nature of our enterprise and embrace the true qualities of our writing. (From Samuel Beckett again: The artist realizes that the creative task is to ‘find a form that accommodates the mess’ [cited in Graver and Federman 1979: 218–19].) Leach elaborated: The anthropologist treats the material of his or her empirical observation as if it were part of an overall equilibrium—and so makes the description that of a coherent phenomenon. ‘All I am asking’, Leach innocently suggests, ‘is that the fictional nature of this equilibrium should be frankly recognized’ (1954:284). And again, ‘culture’, Leach contended, was ‘an ill-defined, redundant category’, which, over the years, had ‘done little to clarify but much to confuse’ anthropological thinking:

I have always taken the line that, in ethnographic writing, cultural differences, though sometimes convenient, are temporary fictions. (...) As anthropologists we need to come to terms with the now well-recognized fact that in a novel the personalities of the characters are derived from aspects of the personality of the author. How could it be otherwise? The *ego* that I know at first hand is my own. When Malinowski writes about the Trobriand Islanders he is writing about himself; when Evans-Pritchard writes about the Nuer he is writing about himself.

(1989:137)

To be ‘better’ anthropologists, we learn from Leach, and to aspire to genuine insight, is to come to a true understanding of the nature, the quality, the source and the subject matter, of anthropological writing. Our concepts – such as ‘culture’ or ‘structural equilibrium’ – may be fictions and our claims to otherness more honestly mediated through the prism of self. We might find our concepts and our claims ‘*convenient*’ for a time, but ultimately they are to be outgrown. It is this temporal or processual quality that may be further addressed here. We write – it is our quotidian practice – but then we might take a more honest, reflective, ironic stance vis-à-vis that writing if we are to accede to its more profound depths and gain insight – and allow it to transcend itself, point beyond itself.

## The process of anthropological composition

We have asked contributors to reflect on their writing from a point and a time beyond it: to provide Commentary on a prior Text. What is revealed? How are the *conveniences* of the time now to be transcended? All of our contributors have

honestly admitted how they might have done differently, how what was written came about contingently—this was not the only way to entextualisation—and how the writing is a moment in a continuing train of thought. Anthony Cohen (1992) has used the word *provisional* in this context, conveying the sense in which the empirical research carries on beyond and through its textual iterations. To write provisionally is to write while recognizing the imperfect and temporary nature of any entextualisation. Whatever may be the claims of the piece of writing—to produce an object (Stavrianakis, Rabinow and Korsby); to produce concepts (Das); to effect transitions (Narayan); to effect consistency (Wulff); to maintain authenticity (Cohen); to retain nuance (Eriksen); to convey the absurd (Vohnsen); to account for historical context (Boyer); to capture non-linear temporalities (Bertelsen); to link the empirical with the universal (Rapport); or to open up the anthropological account for optimal connectivity (Nielsen) – whatever the writing’s claims, we come to find that these claims point beyond themselves. *The ultimate function of the act(s) of writing, we might say, is its transcendence. And it is the particular substance of the writing – its focus, issue, question, problem, and its particular conceptualization and structuration – that opens the space for its specific transcendence.* One writes anthropology and one gains insight by virtue of the particular way in which that writing comes to be seen to be provisional – and is seen beyond, overcome.

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