

## Narrative and Social Science: Reclaiming the Existential

by  
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**Abstract:** From the model developed by Malinowski, ethnographic writing has assumed a standard form. Implicit genre conventions include the unobtrusive presence of the ethnographer; the aim of representing “the native’s point of view”; embellishment by jargon; a focus on everyday situations; and the contextual exegesis of native concepts. Such conventions serve to enhance anthropology’s disciplinary respectability and authority. But the form is “monologic,” revealing nothing of the multi-leveled richness of the encounter between scientist and subject. New narrative forms are recommended, in which neither ethnographers nor subjects are presented as finished entities, but rather as open, vulnerable human colleagues. The work of Manda Cesca and Jose Maria Arguedas provides alternative models of the “dialogic,” non-detached, anti-positivist approach favored by the author.

There is a story to me told by anthropologist Gregory Bateson about a computer which, having been programmed to respond precisely as would a human, was asked by the programmer how it could be determined that its responses were actually those characteristic of a human. There was a pause and then a whirring of spindles before the computer finally responded with a printout which began, “That reminds me of a story ...”

WRITERS AND LITERARY SCHOLARS have for years argued that storytelling is a basic human cognitive instrument, as ancient and ubiquitous as language itself (Arnold in Huxley, 1963; Forster, 1954; Mink, 1978; Scholes, 1981). Although some contemporary writers argue that narrative has outlived its usefulness in literature and should be replaced by a sort of “minimalism,” as in Raymond Carver’s short stories or as in the novel, *The Tree of Life* by Hugh Nissenson, the essential thread of fiction is still, simply, the story. In the past twenty years, the focus on narrative has moved from the field of literature and literary criticism to embrace linguistics, philosophy, history and the social sciences, most notably anthropology. The French have coined a term for this movement—*la narratologie* (Landau, 1984), but it is really based on a simple point: we humans live, remember and dream through stories. In a very real sense, we domesticate this wild world of ours by narrative, making the flux and ambiguity of experience somehow comprehensible. Humans are the story-creating animal. Narrative is inescapable. As Barthes (1966) has written about narrative:

... it is present in myth, legend, fable, short story, epic, history, tragedy, comedy, pantomime, painting . . . stained glass windows, cinema, comic strips, journalism, conversation. In addition, ... the narrative is present at all times, in all places, in all societies: the history of narrative begins with the history of mankind: there does not exist, and never has existed, a people without narratives.

In anthropology, the past twenty years have witnessed the emergence of an “interpretive” (Marcus and Fischer, 1986) or “reflexive” (Ruby, 1982) anthropology which has as its focus critical reflection on both the very concept of culture and the practice of ethnography. The latter concern of this critical perspective—the practice of ethnography or any cultural description—not only includes the more traditional issues of research methods, but also the relatively neglected issues of writing. As part of this reflexive movement, narrative social science has drawn from the field of literary criticism, particularly hermeneutics, both to examine critically the narrative structures of social science writing and to embark on the writing of experimental narrative texts. It is these two implications of narrative—narrative analysis and narrative writing—that I want to touch on in this essay.

I submit that what is at stake in the issue of narrative is the degree to which narrative analysis and writing strike at the very heart of what social science has done in representing human life: transformed passionate life into lifeless data; turned the existential dialogic of the ethnographic enterprise into a positivistic monologue; and in the process contributed to the self-

fulfilling prophecies of civilization that life is abstract, that self and others are objects, and that the world is an efficient equation (Reck, 1986). Narrative social science, by challenging the traditional representations of the human, may be viewed as not only at the center of the deconstruction of social science writing, but also as at the heart of cultural critique (Marcus and Fischer, 1986).

*We die of cold and not  
of darkness*

—Unamuno

The genre conventions that have defined social science writing, most notably ethnography, in the twentieth century have been collectively labeled both “ethnographic realism” (Marcus and Cushman, 1982) and “ethnographic naturalism” (Webster, 1982, 1983). The former term emphasizes the affinity of social science writing to nineteenth-century realist fiction: the latter term is more suggestive of the positivistic context in which this writing developed.

From this point on I will speak primarily of that writing form that has been labeled “ethnography,” since it is what I know best. Regardless of the label that is applied, the traditional genre of ethnographic writing emerged in conjunction with the development of twentieth-century, professional anthropology. More than any other person, Bronislaw Malinowski stands as the symbol of the anthropological paradigm of professional field work, including the legitimate product of that work—the ethnography. His work provided a model whereby it was believed that the chaos of cultural data collected by a motley crew of nineteenth-century explorers, traders, missionaries, lawyers, and naturalists could be transformed into an emerging professional discipline. Field work and the ethnography served as the necessary centerpieces which established anthropology as a specialized discipline with a distinctive method, language and standard, a legitimate part of bureaucratized academia.

Whether the functionalist agenda of Malinowski was explicitly or implicitly imbedded in ethnographies, the result was the same: a cultural description which fell in a seemingly natural way into the standard chapter headings of kinship and marriage, subsistence, religion, values and political organization. Moreover, the ethnography was guided by certain implicit genre conventions which together provided the necessary textual authority to make the discipline reasonably respectable.

Marcus and Cushman (1982: 31-37) have discussed these conventions in greater detail. Briefly, they are: (1) *the structure of total ethnography*, a task which leads to the solution of part-whole description in the sequential table-of-contents approach; (2) *the unintrusive presence of the ethnographer*, a convention providing authority to the text and supporting Malinowski’s (and anthropology’s) illusion that the point of any ethnography is “. . . to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world” (1992:25); (3) *the “common denominator” people*, which also provides authority to the text by substituting the composite “they” for the individual faces who linger only in our memories; (4) *the marking of fieldwork experience*, which typically provides only enough information about field conditions and experiences to convince readers that the ethnographer really was there and heroically overcame great odds in order to carry out research; (5) *the focus on everyday life situations*, including the case study, which lends authority to the ethnographer’s closeness to the subjects of research while still operating within the general precepts of positivism; (6) *representation of the native point of view*, which despite varied phases has remained a central goal of ethnography; (7) *the stylistic extrapolation of particular data* such that specific events are presented as typical events of a particular class of activities; (8) *embellishment by jargon*, a characteristic of any disciplinary writing form which distinguishes the acceptable texts of one discipline from others; and (9) *the contextual exegesis of native concepts and discourse* which once again establishes authority by demonstrating the ethnologist’s familiarity with the subjects’ language and native concepts.

The key to the success of the traditional genre is that it maintains the illusion of distinctiveness while melding social science with the idealized features of both social science research and contemporary civilization—objectivity and detachment, power and control, precision and efficiency, bureaucracy and standardization (see German and Reck, 1978).

Most significantly, the traditional genre supports the positivist image of a social science “outside history, progressively revealing for all time an undialectically given truth” (Webster, 1983:186). This is accomplished through a single-voice, or monologic, narrative which reveals nothing of the existential dialogue that constitutes the natives’ lives, the ethnographer’s life, and the encounter between them. Instead, the narrative presents an image of human existence as abstract and closed, rather than individually situated and open. In so doing, it has perpetuated an alienated, mechanistic image of human existence that, as Gouldner (1971:103) has written, arose at a time “when men entertained the suspicion that the world in which they lived was passion-spent and had little in it worth living or dying for.” It is this “cold” that we are dying from—the avoidance of the darkness, the shadows, the passion of human existence and the risks inherent in the social science enterprise.

*Everything of interest lies in  
the shadows*

—Celine

By the 1960's, the traditional "realist" or "naturalist" genre was entrenched in anthropology and other social sciences. Ethnographies that broke with this genre existed as marginal experiments, such as Bateson's *Naven* (1936), as complements to mainstream approaches, such as Radin's *Crashing Thunder* (1962), or as "popular" accounts of more "serious" research, such as Turnbull's *The Forest People* (1962). The reference points for these texts were still the "realist" or "naturalist" texts of mainstream ethnography.

By the late 1960's, however, the failure of traditional ethnography to adequately represent the human life of both natives and anthropologists was evident to a growing number of ethnographers. This awareness was due to the intellectual stimulus of a general "crisis of narratives," a feature of the postmodern condition in which concern with contextuality, meaning and uncertainties started to loosen the grip of entrenched paradigms, including those that governed acceptable genres (Lyotard, 1984).

In anthropology, this "crisis of narrative" led the discipline in three general directions. First, Clifford Geertz and his colleagues have embarked on an interpretive approach which recognizes ethnographic subjects as storytellers and which has led to ethnographic descriptions which "read" the meaning of culture in particular events, much as one reads the meaning of a written text (Geertz, 1968, 1972, 1973; Rabinow and Sullivan, 1979). While valuable, this interpretive approach to ethnography does not go full circle, for it fails to recognize fully the ethnographer as a storyteller who is existentially situated. As Webster (1983) has pointed out, this approach echoes the neo-idealism of the nineteenth century, such as in Wilhelm Dilthey's distinctions between *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*. As such, it fails to escape the positivistic reification of the ethnographer as an object abstracted from the context of the ethnographer's own existence. Nevertheless, it was Geertz, as the most proximate pioneer, who has inspired subsequent reflection and experimentation in ethnographic writing.

A second general direction involves the actual analysis of ethnographies as texts, drawing heavily from the works of Gadamer (1965) and Ricoeur (1978) (see Clifford and Marcus, 1986, for example). Although Ricoeur was a primary theoretical stimulus for the conception of the ethnographer as a translator or reader of cultural texts in the Geertzian fashion (see Ricoeur, 1973), he also has been instrumental in extending the notion of culture as text to include the ethnographer as storyteller. This was an essential step in the development of experimental ethnographic genres which are written with conscious narrative structures, as well as for a critical examination of the implicit narrative structures of traditional ethnographies. Gadamer's "dialectical hermeneutics" has further shifted emphasis from the notion of ethnography as the reading of cultural texts to the notion of ethnography as dialogue. Viewed as a two-step dialogue, initially between researcher and subject and next between researcher/author and reader, social science becomes neither the description of a pre-existing object which is discovered by the researcher nor a reading of a pre-existing text, but rather an *event* of understanding resulting from the collision and subsequent dialogue of existentially situated individuals.

These theoretical perspectives on the ethnographic enterprises have been necessary precursors to the development of the third, and, in my opinion, the most significant development in narrative ethnography: the creation of experimental texts which are written with an explicit narrative awareness. Theoretical perspectives alone are insufficient as long as their full implications are never realized in the product of research and reflection, the ethnography. Unfortunately, much of the reflection on ethnography as narrative has produced only stories *about* storytelling, not storytelling itself.

However, the past decade has witnessed a number of ethnographies which have attempted to utilize the theoretical perspectives mentioned briefly above to break through to new genres (Cesera, 1982; Crapanzano, 1980; Dumont, 1978; Dwyer, 1982; Jackson, 1986; Rabinow, 1977; Reck, 1978, for example). The ethnographies of Crapanzano, Dumont and Rabinow have most often been discussed as representations that most reflect the theoretical perspectives of Geertz, Ricoeur and Gadamer, perhaps because they have also been active in explicating the hermeneutic theory behind experimental ethnographies.

Although these ethnographies exhibit significant differences from the traditional ethnographic genre, they have not managed a serious threat to that literary form. In fact, the degree of legitimacy that certain of these texts have enjoyed in anthropology belie their rather radical underpinnings. Their acceptance has been due to the fact that they most often appeared after the ethnographer had earlier demonstrated the proper detachment and "objectivity" through writing a more standard text (e.g. Dumont, 1976; Rabinow, 1975). Thus, the potential subversiveness of these narratives is diminished because they were not written as the initial or primary product of fieldwork. Instead of critical alternatives to traditional writing, they exist as supplementary personal accounts, reflections and confessions within the boundaries of a well-established ethnographic sub-genre. What is necessary for experimental ethnographies to stand as authentic, unapologetic alternatives is for them to be presented as the direct and primary product of fieldwork. Although other works could be used to exemplify critical alternatives to traditional ethnography, two ethnographic texts which, for different reasons, offer real alternatives are Manda Cesera's *Reflections of a Woman Anthropologist* (1982) and Jose Maria Arguedas' *Yawar Fiesta* (1985).

It is an unfortunate symptom of the malaise of social science that Cesera's extraordinary book is written under a pseudonym. Still, her book is extraordinary precisely because she has taken the theoretical perspectives of Gadamer, Ricoeur, and the existentialists Heidegger and Sartre seriously enough to shape an ethnography which is a living argument for those perspectives. Her narrative is a complicated weaving of observations, experiences, excerpts from her journals and letters to her

mother and husband. The book is a complicated story of a woman and an ethnographer *becoming*, but it is not written in the vein of the acceptable “personal account” sub-genre of ethnographic writing, in which it is acceptable to discuss the growth and change of the ethnographer as they encounter “the other world”—that fixed, completed entity in which the other exists. Cesera’s narrative is not only about *her* becoming, but also about the *Lenda*’s becoming. Neither ethnographer nor subjects are presented as finished entities, but rather as open, unfinished beings—human colleagues—locked together in what Richardson (1975) has called the impossible task of being human.

Moreover, her narrative was not written after more traditional accounts established her *professional* credibility; rather her narrative exists at the beginning of her career and establishes the basis for her *human* credibility. In the end, neither the *Lenda* nor the ethnographer are known in a traditional sense—brought from the shadows to the light. Rather, they are left fully in the shadows where, indeed, everything of interest lies.

Arguedas’ *Yawar Fiesta* is a narrative which challenges the traditional ethnographic genre in a quite different way. As a fictional account set in the real Peruvian highland town of Puquio where Arguedas spent part of his childhood, the book is a quietly powerful depiction of the intricate web of relationships between elite landowners and other town aristocrats, members of Puquio’s four Indian neighborhoods, and the city residents who come to visit the town at fiesta time.

At the time of his death in 1969, Arguedas was known equally well as poet, novelist and anthropologist. This novel, along with two others entitled *Agua* and *Los Rios Profundos*, were, however, neither tangential supplements nor poetic appendices to his anthropology. As such, his fiction breaks with the tradition of ethnographic fiction which occupies a marginal, but still legitimate, niche in ethnographic sub-genres (see Langness and Frank, 1978; Schmidt, 1981, 1984). The writing of fiction in ethnography remained moderately acceptable as long as it did not challenge the preeminence of the realist or naturalistic genre and the epistemological foundations of that genre: fact vs. fiction, objectivity vs. subjectivity. In contrast, Arguedas’ novels do challenge such facile dichotomies since they are at the heart of his ethnography.

His struggle, as he saw it, was to face the illusive task of forging an authentic form of expressing human existence, that “... noble whirlwind in which different spirits, as if forged on antipodal stars, struggle, attract, repel, and mingle with one another amid silent snows and lakes, frost and fire” (Arguedas, 1985:xx). Both *Yawar Fiesta* and *Agua* were written before Arguedas was thirty years old, and they represented his *first* significant attempts at crafting a product from the experience of doing ethnography. Written in a style which combines Spanish vocabulary with Quechua syntax (a kind of linguistic whirlwind amid snows and lakes, frost and fire), they represent the very heart of his struggle “... to describe the life of those villages ... in such a way that its pulse would never be forgotten, so that it would beat against the reader’s conscience like a river” (Arguedas, 1985: xvi).

What makes Arguedas’ fiction such a powerful narrative challenge to traditional ethnography is that the ethnographic novel is presented as the legitimate primary and direct literary product of doing fieldwork. For Arguedas, fiction by anthropologists could not be relegated to the status of a spare-time activity done on weekend breaks taken from doing “real” ethnography. Rather, he saw the novel as containing both the form and language necessary to allow both writer and reader to enter the shadows of human existence.

... words do not state something that might exist outside  
them; by being spoken they establish a mode of existence  
— Buber

The question remains: are narrative ethnographies more authentic representations of the human than the realist or naturalistic genre? As already mentioned, all ethnographies can be viewed as narratives; they tell stories. The difference is that narrative ethnographies are written with an awareness of the use of narrative. It is this narrative awareness and the literary form that is the consequence of such awareness that makes the critical difference.

The basic *ideal* structure for which the narrative genre strives is dialogic rather than monologic. It supplies a “surplus of vision,” in the words of Bakhtin (1984), which promotes a constantly evolving dialogue of meaning. The meaning of the narrative is open and, thus, author and reader are capable of interaction. The author does not control the response of the reader, nor does the reader “know what the author meant.” Neither author nor reader is in a privileged position in relationship to one another. Rather, the author and the reader are engaged in active communication with one another, each as a living, equally privileged consciousness. Dialogue is made possible precisely because the narrative continues to live even after it is committed to the written page and because authors are never able to manifest intended meanings completely (see Bakhtin, 1981).

The dialogic structure inherent in ideal narrative mirrors human discourse and existence. The author of a narrative remains profoundly active, but it is action in relation to an equally active other. Meaning is always mediated through the encounter of self with other, beginning with the otherness of language itself. Similarly, the authorship of the self—the basic activity of human existence—is anchored in a dialogue between self and other, neither of which are completed entities. Thus, the activity of narrative authorship parallels the human activity of the authorship of the self (Bakhtin, 1981).

This stands in stark contrast to the realist or naturalistic genre of traditional ethnography which is inherently monologic. This

genre allows the ethnographer to assume the authority of the single voice, imposing unobstructed, completed meanings on a reader who passively receives those meanings. Dialogue is impossible since it is assumed that ethnographers can unequivocally convey a meaning that is exclusively theirs to a reader and thereby control the reader's response.

Additionally, the traditional ethnography suggests that the same monologic structure that it promotes between author and reader also exists between ethnographer and subject. In this way, the monologic circle is complete: the ethnographer collects data (or meaning) and then translates that data (or meaning) to the reader. This is no hint of authentic dialogue. There is only the monologic voice of the privileged positivist who sits as the authority over both subject and reader. Thus, the positivistic epistemological foundations of the monologic text are precisely those so persuasively attacked by Gadamer, Geertz, Ricoeur and others.

By challenging this monologic world view, the narrative text exists as a critique of the very foundation of contemporary civilization—the objectification of self and other. The objectification of self and other is based upon a monologic view of human existence: the subject is a “thing-in-itself” which follows norms and adheres to values which can be discovered by another “thing-in-itself” through a detached research process which disembodies both researcher and subject from the very hope, joy, fear, love, freedom, despair and absurdity of their lives. The challenge to this objectification created by narrative ethnography opens the possibility that we can develop a dialogic language of ethnography which allows us to confront the flux and ambiguity of existence, a language which is “... not impelled toward a well-rounded, finalized, systematically monologic whole ... (but which) lives a tense life on the borders of someone else's thought, someone else's consciousness” (Bakhtin, 1984: 32). Only then will we be able to begin to approach what Henry (1963) alluded to when he wrote of “passionate ethnography.” It is the dialogic language of narrative which can bring ethnography closer to the existential reality of both ethnographer and subject and ethnographer and reader—human colleagues struggling to create themselves from something not inside or outside them, but rather *between* them.

If, indeed, humans are the story-telling animals as *la narratologie* maintains, then authentic ethnography should demand that we *understand* this story-telling animal by *being* a story-telling animal, in other words by being fully human. Narrative ethnography meets this demand by placing at our fingertips the possibility of both reflexively understanding the story of the self and other that is our fieldwork, as well as developing the language to authentically represent that story. As such it is a powerful reminder that we ethnographers are, after all, only human. We should be both humble and proud, and hopeful that, like Bateson's computer, we will always be reminded of a story.

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