Literary Anthropology

The Sub-disciplinary Context

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This special issue on anthropology and literature invited proposals for original contributions focusing on relationships between anthropology and literature. We were especially interested in the following questions: what role does literature play in anthropology? Can literature be considered as ethnography? What are the relationships between anthropology and literature, past and present? Are anthropology and anthropological motives used in literature? We also looked for critical readings of writers as anthropologists and critical readings of anthropologists as writers. Moreover, we wanted to assess the influence of literature on the invention of traditions, rituals and cultural performances. All these different questions and topics are clearly connected with the study of literacy, illiteracy and popular culture. They also lead to questions regarding potential textual strategies for ethnography and the possibilities of bringing together the field of anthropology (more associated with the social sciences) and literary studies (traditionally part of the humanities).

As a result of our call for articles we received more than twenty-five proposals, which shows the vitality of the field and its relevance for anthropologists today. Although it was difficult to select from these different proposals, we realised that some of them were more historical while others focused more on the contemporary. Some proposals were more preoccupied with the literary texts themselves while others emphasised the social and cultural contexts in which these texts were written. An important criterion in our selection is the geographic origin of the proposals, as the relationship between anthropology and literature varies according to the national and regional academic traditions. Throughout this volume, we have endeavoured to balance different perspectives and regions, offering a comparative insight on texts and contexts, past and present, in different countries.

The Sub-disciplinary Canon

Although dealing with written texts is hardly a novel practice for anthropologists (Nic Craith 2012), literary anthropology is still on the

margins of the disciplinary field. In 1973, Geertz compared the concept of culture with text. He proposed that the ‘culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong’ (Geertz 1973: 452). Geertz compared the process of doing ethnography with ‘trying to read (in the sense of “construct a reading of”) a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries’. Of course, this is hardly a conventional manuscript with ‘conventionalized graphs of sound writing and letters’. Instead it is a manuscript written in ‘transient examples of shaped behavior’ (Geertz 1973: 10).

More than a decade later, James Clifford, George Marcus (and others) explored the concept of culture as text in the context of ethnographic writings. Contributors to the Clifford and Marcus volume (1986) brought many skills more commonly associated with literary criticism to bear on the practice of anthropological writing. This disciplinary phase is commonly referred to as ‘the literary turn’ and it hearkened back to the time when anthropologists such as Victor Turner, Mary Douglas and Claude Lévi-Strauss showed an interest in literary theory and practice (Nic Craith 2012). Clifford points out that ‘Margaret Mead, Edward Sapir, and Ruth Benedict saw themselves as both anthropologists and literary artists’ (Clifford 1986: 3).

While the notion of ‘literary anthropology’ is not yet given full recognition as a sub-field of anthropology, the disciplinary canon is evolving. Contributors include Vincent Crapanzano (1992) and Renato Rosaldo (1989). Significantly, since its publication in 1986, the Clifford and Marcus tome has had a number of significant responses – although not necessarily all supportive. These include *Women Writing Culture* (Behar and Gordon 1995), and *After Writing Culture* (James, Hockey and Dawson 1997). Other noteworthy books include *Anthropology off the Shelf* (Waterston and Vesperi 2009) and *The Anthropology of Writing* (Barton and Papen 2010). A more recent example of literature-based anthropology is Kirin Narayan’s work (2012), which focuses on Anton Chekhov. Her ethnography goes far beyond Chekhov’s plays and short stories and focuses also on his life as a writer and his ventures into non-fiction. Significantly, her ethnography calls on Chekhov to give new energy to the writing of both ethnography and creative nonfiction.

Literature as Resource

As Nigel Rapport (2012) explains, the ‘field’ of literary anthropology is twofold. In the first instance, there is a focus on literature itself and the role it plays in our social and individual lives. ‘Literary anthropology can be understood here as an exploration of different kinds of genre of expression, and how these genres can be said to have a historical specificity, a cultural evaluation, and a social institutionalism attached to them’ (Rapport 2012). This sub-field considers writers such as Chekov, Dickens and Eliot and their endeavour to describe life authentically through social realist fiction.

In one of his earlier significant works, Nigel Rapport (1994) turned to literature as a resource that could enhance his own fieldwork (Nic Craith and Kockel 2014). Rapport argued that nineteenth-century English literature was guided by an ideology of social realism. Writings were modelled on resources such as letters, diaries and biographies. As is the case with anthropology, British literature aimed to portray a realistic life experience. ‘In short, the novel was expected, as Thomas Hardy described it, to be exceptional enough to justify the telling, but also reconciled to the average; the novel was mimetic’ (Rapport 1994a: 17).

Rapport had conducted fieldwork in a rural village in Northern England, which he called Wanet (Rapport 1993). His fieldwork focused on social relations between local people and the multiplicity of their worldviews. He engaged with the diversity of individual beliefs and the chaos of our social reality. He proposed that this chaos was also implicit in the writings of E. M. Foster. From Rapport’s perspective, Foster’s novels were as true to reality as Rapport’s own fieldwork. Indeed, the combination of fieldwork and literature seemed essential to provide a holistic picture of British culture and society (Nic Craith and Kockel 2014). In a similar vein, Richard Handler and David Segal were attracted to the Jane Austen’s novels. Although Austen was not a professional anthropologist, Handler and Segal (1999) viewed her novels as anthropological since they provided significant insights into nineteenth-century English culture and society. Like Rapport, Handler and Segal were impressed with the multiple realities in Austen’s novels enabling readers to experience the complexity of the British experience.

‘Ethnocriticism’ is the term used by Jean-Marie Privat to designate works which analyse the contents of specific literary works in order better to understand the cultural context of their author’s time. He

first applied it to *Madame Bovary*, the famous French nineteenth-century novel of Flaubert (Privat 1994). Since then the definition of ethnocriticism has evolved and expanded (Drouet 2009). Contemporary French anthropologists apply an ethnocritical perspective to different literary genres such as contemporary theatre or poetry, or even to other artistic productions like visual artefacts for instance (Fournier and Privat 2014).

Anthropologists as Writers

As well as focusing on writing as a resource for anthropology, the sub-field of literary anthropology focuses on the role of writing for anthropologists themselves and involves a range of questions. One issue is the extent to which the writings of anthropologists constituted literature. James Boon (1972), for example, queries whether the writings of Lévi-Strauss belonged to the French literary tradition. More recently, Vincent Debaene (2010) has pointed out that anthropologists in the French cultural tradition frequently wrote two books rather than one when they returned from their fieldwork – one research-based and the other more literary in ambition. This was the case with prominent researchers such as Griaule and Lévi-Strauss for instance. The literary work appears to emerge from anthropological fieldwork diaries which can serve as the basis either for an essay or novel.

Of course the separation of literary work from the more objective fieldwork is also controversial. One issue that has raised hackles is the extent to which an anthropologist projects his/her own personality onto the writing-up of their fieldwork. Leach (1984) argues that there is an inevitability about this: '[w]hen Malinowski writes about Trobriand Islanders he is writing about himself; when Evans-Pritchard writes about the Nuer he is writing about himself' (Leach 1984: 3). In a later analysis of four eminent scholars, Geertz (1988) argued for the inevitability of what might be called a 'personal signature' in anthropological writings. Such statements have prompted calls for greater self-reflection and self-narrative in ethnography (Okely and Callaway 1992). All of this is to acknowledge rather than 'conceal' the human nature of the anthropologist him or herself.

However, such calls have caused angst since they are perceived to dilute or impact on the 'scientific' image of the anthropological text and the 'literary turn' has provoked considerable controversy. Marilyn Strathern (1987) was concerned with the new 'aesthetic' and the

implications of this for the authenticity of the field. Others saw the focus on words – particularly ‘Western words’ – as a continuation of unequal relations experienced in colonial contexts that impacted on the scientific duty of anthropologists in exploring the human condition (Gellner 1992).

Although tensions between the scientific nature of the discipline and its literary nature is ongoing, new publications continue. In a recent publication (Wulff 2016), contributors explore the centrality of writing to anthropology, as well as the genres that contemporary anthropologists are expected to master. The volume examines the way in which anthropological writing shapes the intellectual content of the discipline and takes up the notion of ‘writing as craft’ within and across genres.

This Issue

In the five contributions to this special issue, six authors propose different reflections on the relations between anthropology and literature, thus bringing new thoughts and contributing to the consolidation of the sub-field of literary anthropology. Amundsen concentrates on the ethnographic eye of an accepted writer in Western Europe in the twentieth century. Using the example of George Orwell, he shows how this author, once a dishwasher in Paris and a poor worker in London, depicted his social environment with empathy. Orwell, Amundsen suggests, used the methods of ethnography to describe his own situation. His work can therefore be considered as ‘autoethnography’ when the writer’s eye can become the eye of an ethnographer and looks at London and Paris poor people. Moreover, Orwell’s ‘literature as ethnography’ was didactic and intended to inform public opinion and therefore promote political change. The writer’s depiction of ‘otherness’ in the context of industrialised societies shows his skill as an ethnographer as well as his political consciousness.

Gramatchikova, focusing on the work of Russian writer and ethnographer S. V. Maksimov, argues that ethnography produced a new descriptive language in nineteenth-century Russia. In the time of Maksimov, ethnography used fiction, artistry and education to enlighten the masses. Maksimov built images of the indigenous peoples of northern Russia, revealing a leading colonial and evolutionist discourse. Studying Maksimov’s biases today, the reader can learn much about clichés and stereotypes generated by nineteenth-century ethnographers, using literary styles and images.

Hytönen-Ng's contribution focuses on the influence of anthropological writings on Shamanic practitioners today. She suggests anthropological books have been very influential for Shamanic practitioners, sometimes leading them to 'go shaman' after reading a specific book. This raises the question of the performative effect of anthropological books on real practices on the field, but also ethical questions regarding the behaviour of anthropologists in the field.

Wilk concentrates on the influence of popular literature (theatre plays) on festivals in Spain today. Traditional folk theatre is adapted in contemporary shows. In the city of Valencia, these shows are written by local authors and are based on the life of the patron of the city – San Vicente Ferrer. Performed every year for the local festival, the plays not only preserve traditional Valencian customs and the region's own language but also have an important role in shaping social relationships within the community. The writings therefore have an active role in the transmission of the rituals. They are not only a means to hand down the tradition but they enable people to gather around a true literary performance.

In the final contribution, Fournier and Privat explore the present and future of literary anthropology in France. The essay features theoretical discussions concerning the interaction between anthropology and literature as academic disciplines. While initially focusing on historical relationships, the authors move the debate forward with reference to the anthropology of art. Placing strong emphasis on the sociocultural context in which literature is produced, they explore the influence of literature and literary motives on contemporary cultural practices. This is a new dimension to literary anthropology, and one which deserves much more work.

This selection of essays presents a set of perspectives that is balanced between past and present, West and East. All the essays broadly concern the relations between literature and anthropology in different European countries and further afield. However, these relations are studied in different ways. While Amundsen looks at literary works as ethnography, Gramatchikova explores ethnographic descriptions as literature. Hytönen-Ng's contribution presents the impact of anthropological works on shamanistic practices and beliefs while Wilk illustrates the impact of literary works on performance. The final chapter explores the field of literary anthropology in France in particular.

In a series of 'essays on cultural renewal', the Scottish poet Kenneth White (2004) postulates the urgent need for a new anthropology. He proposes 'an interactive, creative approach to fieldwork taking poesis

literally' (Kockel 2010: 184). Drawing the world of literature and anthropology together, White argues for 'not only a new philosophy of poetry, but a new poetic anthropology' (White 2004: 145). For us, the whole field of literary anthropology raises many exciting epistemological questions about literature as a resource for anthropologists and about the problems of writing in general. Our series of essays addresses some of those questions but also raises new ones. Enriching the field of literary anthropology, they ask whether performance theories as well as semiotics and communicational approaches can also help anthropologists better understand interactions between humans and their wider environment.

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