

Chapter 11

The Writer as Anthropologist

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The most intriguing literary portrait of an ethnographer that I know of is to be found in one of Jorge Luis Borges's late collections of poetry and prose, *Elogio de la sombra* (1969, as *In Praise of Darkness*, 1974). "El etnógrafo" is a short (two-page) story in which the narrator recalls the fate of a doctoral student at a US university, whose name (he believes) was Fred Murdock. This "ordinary" young man has difficulties deciding on his research topic. So, one of the professors advises him to go live on the reservation of an indigenous tribe out west, to observe their rites and discover the secret that the medicine men reveal to the initiates. When he comes back he will have his dissertation, and the university will see to it that it is published. Murdock agrees and sets out on his mission, and as an exemplary anthropologist, lives for more than two years under strenuous conditions on the prairie, acquiring all the cultural habits of the indigenous population. He even comes to the point of dreaming in a language "that was not that of his fathers" (Borges 1998: 335) and thinking in a way that his previous logic rejected. After some time the tribe's spiritual leader tells him to remember his dreams, and the secret he has yearned for is, at last, revealed to him. But at the moment of initiation and acceptance, when Murdock is expected to have completed the successful immersion into indigenous otherness and literally to have become an Indian, he departs from the reservation without saying a word to anyone. Upon his return to the city, he visits the professor and tells him that he knew the secret and had resolved not to reveal it.

"Are you bound by your oath?" the professor asked.

"That's not the reason," Murdock replied. "I learned something out there that I can't express."

“The English language may not be able to communicate it,” the professor suggested.

“That’s not it, sir. Now that I possess the secret, I could tell it in a hundred different and even contradictory ways. I don’t know how to tell you this, but the secret is beautiful, and science, *our* science, seems mere frivolity to me now.”

After a pause he added:

“And anyway, the secret is not as important as the paths that led me to it. Each person has to walk those paths himself” (Borges 1998: 335).

The professor then finally asks him if he plans to go back and live among the Indians. Murdock replies that what the men of the prairie taught him is valid anywhere and for any circumstances. The narrator laconically closes the story by noting “Fred married, divorced and is now one of the librarians at Yale” (Borges 1998: 335).

I spent five years recently struggling with the relation between fiction and truth—trying to solve the riddle of the seeming paradox, that fiction may be a way of getting at a certain truth—and this story was in a way what I finally arrived at, as a form of condensation and conclusion. I shall come back below to what it may imply. The subject of my research was the role of fiction—primarily prose literature but also, for example, film—in the transition processes of South Africa and Argentina (Hemer 2011, 2012a). The project was one of so-called *artistic research*, and it was from the outset my decisive intention to find a form that (1) to some extent is congenial with the subject matter of my investigation, and (2) transgresses the format of the conventional dissertation, yet fulfills all the criteria of academic research in terms of argument, transparency, referencing etc. The second point is crucial. The most congenial form might be a *novel*—or some kind of genre hybrid with fictional elements—that unsettles the very distinction between fiction and truth. Such text would indeed be an interesting challenge. (At least, it seemed like an intriguing possibility eight, nine years ago, when I started thinking about the project. Since then it has become a global fashion in literature to play in the borderland of fiction and fact.) But, such text would also be easily dismissed by academia as *fiction*—that is, as nonverifiable. Hence I decided to take on a much greater challenge—in fact, a mission impossible, or, what would turn out to be necessarily a compromise.

First of all, my approach to academia has been that of an outsider. I am a *writer*. I did not have an academic mother discipline—unless journalism is defined as an academic discipline, which it clearly is not. I never even regarded myself as a literary critic, although I have written hundreds of book reviews during more than twenty years as an arts journalist in different media. Writing is my profession—and my discipline, if you like. By writing, I am not referring to literary writing only, but journalism and academic writing as well.

Those are the three principal writing practices whose interrelations I have elsewhere illustrated with a like-sided triangle (Hemer 2005). I claim, hypothetically, that all forms of creative writing happen in the dynamic tension between these three poles, which are defined and regulated by certain clearly distinguishable traditions and genre conventions. In varying degrees, consciously or not, the novelist, the reporter, and the academic researcher all have to relate to the other two writing practices. But whereas writing style is crucial to both literature and journalism, it is strikingly subordinated in academia, as the supposedly neutral means of conveying the result of the research. Lack of style may sometimes even be regarded as a virtue, whereas good writing is met with suspicion, as if the eloquence were a way of concealing a meager academic content. Hence, according to this logic: the duller the text, the more significant the research behind it. This applies, not least, to anthropology. Think of Mary Louise Pratt's often-quoted exclamation: "How, one asks constantly, could such interesting people doing such interesting things produce such dull books?" (Pratt 1986: 33). Pratt's US colleague and countryman, Vincent Crapanzano, explains this seeming paradox as a dissociation between the field experience—what he calls the ethnographic confrontation—and the writing: "Indeed, one could argue that at one level the writing of ethnography is an attempt to put a full-stop to the ethnographic confrontation, just as, so often in the history of civilization, writing has selectively embalmed reality rather than continuously explicating it" (Crapanzano 1977: 70).¹

Please note that I am not trying to stage a conflict between literature and academia. Rather to the contrary. Most of the writers I interviewed for my thesis combine creative literary writing with more discursive forms. Ricardo Piglia, Carlos Gamerro, Martin Kohan in Argentina, and Bhekizizwe Peterson in South Africa are all academics besides being fiction writers. A better-known example would be JM Coetzee. He is not one of my interviewees, but one of the main references. Internationally, he is exclusively known as a novelist, but his work as a critic and essayist is as extensive as his fiction. And the question of fiction's relation to truth is a crucial concern, in his novels as well as in his nonfiction work. *Doubling the Point* (Coetzee 1992), which spans over two decades, from 1970 to 1990, is a key volume of essays interspersed with interviews, by the editor David Atwell, that deal with "the question of autobiography." When asked what it is that enables him to speak about the relationship between his critical activity and his fiction, Coetzee rephrases the question as one about *truth-telling* rather than autobiography. He distinguishes between two kinds of truth—the first truth to fact, the second to something beyond that, something that comes in—or from—the very process of writing. "... It is naïve to think that writing is a simple two-stage process: first you decide what you want to say, then you say it. On the con-

trary, as all of us know, you write because you do not know what you want to say. Writing reveals to you what you wanted to say in the first place. That is the sense in which one can say that writing writes us" (Coetzee 1992: 17–18). What does truth of this "higher" order imply? Is it a characteristic of fiction alone, something that only yields itself in the process of *literary* writing? The interviewer returns again and again to Coetzee's double perspective, as a critic and a fiction writer, and on the question of the novelist's relation with literary and critical *theory*, Coetzee quite frankly declares that he feels a greater freedom to follow where his thinking takes him when he is writing fiction. One reason is that he is not a trained philosopher, but another has to do precisely with the two discursive modes. Stories, he says, are defined by their irresponsibility—that is, "responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road" (Coetzee 1992: 246). When he writes criticism, on the other hand, he is always aware of responsibility toward a goal, set up not only by the argument, but also by the discourse of criticism itself. His concern is to write novels in which "he is not unduly handicapped (compared with the philosopher) when playing with ideas" (Coetzee 1992: 246). In his most recent work, from 1999 and onward, the two formerly separate yet communicating practices have been combined, and even fused, in more and less innovative ways.

My intent was, however, to become a researcher, in an academic meaning, yet retaining the perspective of the literary writer. The empirical material was gathered at several subsequent "field trips" in the years 2006 to 2008. I carried a suitcase with thirty kilos of books from Buenos Aires, and tapes with some ten hours of interviews, in addition to all the tapes and books and videos that I had brought from South Africa the year before. I had, in other words, more than enough material to work with, but I really did not know what to do with it. As time was ticking by, my desperation grew to find some kind of magic formula to address and arrange what seemed more and more unfathomable. Finally, or actually while I was still doing the arduous transcribing of the South African interviews, I simply decided to do what I know I'm quite good at: I started writing. My natural point of departure and first reference was the journey I had made to South Africa sixteen years earlier, in 1991, as a reporter for the daily newspaper that was my employer at the time,² precisely at the very beginning of the transition process that was the object of this new investigation. I decided that what I now set out to do was also a form of "essay reportage." But whereas my travel writing had, to a large extent, been improvised on location, finding its form and content during the course of the journey, I was now sitting with an already gathered collection of material that was, on the one hand, much more extensive than what I had brought back from any of my journalistic expeditions, and, on

the other, only a fraction of the total amount of research that I would have to carry out. As a reporter, I could afford to be an impressionist and even to make a virtue of my tourist position, leaning on the dubious presumption that first impressions are always right. As a researcher, by contrast, I found myself in Borges's *garden of forking paths*,³ where every reference led to another, and not necessarily ever back to the main track. The material not only grew in the process of writing; it gradually changed character. I am not sure how best to describe this ongoing knowledge process, but I know that it is intrinsically linked to the act of writing, and that it is fundamentally *intuitive*. In that sense, it resembles the literary writing process—even though it is disciplined by academic standards, and in English, at that, which was perhaps the greatest challenge of all.

My suggestion for the most congenial form hence turned out to be a basically discursive text that borders on both journalism and literature, incorporating reportage, essay, and memoir. Not fiction, for reasons that I have explained above. But I would be naïve to claim that there are no fictional elements. Memory belongs to that special category of “subjective truth,” and when I recall experiences that I have previously used as material for my novels, the border between memory and fiction tends to become blurry. There is also a fictional element in the narrative structure, which follows the chronological timeline of my journeys and interviews, although most of the reading and research was actually conducted in between and after the “field trips.” For example, I interviewed Carlos Gamerro before I had read any of his books. The interviews on the whole constituted a major challenge. In academia, the interview is principally a method to collect data—not a form or genre in itself, as in journalism. My interviews were not structured, in a strict academic sense; they were more like explorations by means of conversation with fellow writers. If I had integrated them into my own analysis, they would have been condensed down to just a few quotes, and I felt that the principal value of these talks would vanish in the process. So, I decided not to kill my darlings, but let them run in parallel, almost *in extenso*, sparsely edited, in a sort of dialogue with the body text, a bit in the same way that two different narrative registers—first person, third person, past tense, present tense—can be intertwined in a novel. And I really do regard my interviewees as co-authors rather than “informants”—although I am of course assuming the privileged position of editor.

But, if I claimed to be conducting academic research, what, then, would my academic subject matter be? Since “truth” primarily connotes philosophy, and “fiction” presumably has its natural counterpart in comparative literature, the theoretical and methodological foundation would appear to gravitate toward *literary aesthetics*. That was also my presumption. I plunged,

with some enthusiasm, into what seemed to be a debate that had passed its momentum in the 1990s, and I soon realized that I was leading myself astray from where I had intended to go, and becoming further and further removed from the turbulent reality of political conflict and social transformation. I found a better match in the emerging field of “law and literature,” which I came across in my readings on the South African *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. But with no judicial background whatsoever I did not feel fully comfortable in that context either. Only at an advanced stage of the process, when I had already gathered all my “field” data, did I realize what I had known all the time, but not taken into consideration, possibly because it was so close at hand—namely, that there is another major academic tradition that approaches the issues of truth and fiction from a different angle than that of literary studies, and often with a more experimental, sometimes explicitly transgressive, purpose.

In the introduction to the fascinatingly far-seeing and highly influential—I dare say epoch-making—anthology *Writing Culture* (1986), one of the editors, James Clifford, describes ethnography as *hybrid textual activity*, traversing genres and disciplines (Clifford 2010: 2–3).⁴ *Ethnographic writing*, in Clifford’s generous understanding, which encompasses the historical predecessors of explorers’ journals and travelers’ reports, evidently borders on both journalism and literature. Ethnographers were, indeed, often the forerunners of colonial expansion, but they were also world reporters before the very notion of “foreign news.” And many of them were certainly excellent writers. US American anthropologist icons Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict both wrote poetry “on the side,” while French ethnographer Michel Leiris was primarily a novelist, poet, and art critic. Leiris’s first ethnographic expedition was the great *Dakar-Djibouti* mission in the 1930s to collect African art for French museums. His diary from the mission, *L’Afrique fantôme* (1934, *Phantom Africa*), is a partly hallucinatory and dreamlike record of the confrontation with the African reality. If Leiris is the surrealist poet-turned-ethnographer, Laura Bohannan is a cultural anthropologist-turned-novelist. In *Return to Laughter* (1954), she disclosed her fieldwork experience from Nigeria, disguised under the pen name Elizabeth Smith Bowen. Other prominent anthropologists such as Mary Douglas, Clifford Geertz, and Claude Lévi-Strauss stayed within the ethnographic writing genre, but they have, indeed, as Clifford puts it, “blurred the boundary separating art from science.” (Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes tropiques*, first published in 1955, is possibly the most influential ethnographic work ever published—and definitely, by any standard, literature of highest quality.)

But what, exactly, is the “literariness” of ethnography, other than good writing and distinctive style? Clifford talks about ethnographies as *fictions*, to

underscore the *partiality* of cultural and historical truths: “Even the best ethnographic texts—serious, true fictions—are systems, or economies, of truth. Power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control” (Clifford 2010: 7). Replace “ethnographic” with “literary,” and the meaning will in my opinion be just as valid, although the notion of truth may have slightly different connotations. The author is, in the two cases, both interpreter and prisoner of his/her own time. Clifford’s British colleague, Nigel Rapport, actually suggests that anthropology and literature are *as one* “in their creative and imaginative writing of social reality” (Rapport 1994: 250).

The principal ethnographic method, participant observation, has also been a favored journalistic and literary technique. In news journalism, the combined presence and invisibility of the reporter is still an ideal, if not the prevailing norm, and many literary writers, with the ambition to depict reality in a truthful way, strive to be like an all-seeing “fly-on-the-wall”—or, if not stuck on the wall, flying around unnoticed in the field of action. In classical ethnography, there was a sharp and absolute split between what one could call “the ethnographic self” and “the personal self.”⁵ In the 1960s of decolonization, which entailed a moment of disciplinary crisis and self-examination, this prevailing subjective/objective balance cracked, and an ethnographic subgenre emerged; what Clifford calls the self-reflexive “fieldwork account,” for which Leiris, Smith Bowen, and Lévi-Strauss were decisive predecessors (Clifford 2010: 13–14). This happens more or less simultaneously with the appearance of the “new novel” (*le nouveau roman*)—Leiris is one of the admirable models in Michel Butor’s manifesto-like *Répertoire* (1960). Incidentally, it also concurs with the renewal of the (political) chronicle or reportage, when fiction writers descend from the ivory towers and turn into committed reporters, sometimes arguably even ethnographers. Rodolfo Walsh’s *Operación Masacre* (1987), a precedent of “new journalism” by almost a decade, and a classic in Argentinean political literature, is the pioneer example. In other words, at a time when literature, on the one hand, aspires to becoming scientific and, on the other, reengages with social and political reality, anthropology starts moving in the opposite direction—to the rhetoric of the autobiography and the ironic self-portrait (Clifford 2010: 14). In the “fieldwork account,” the ethnographer becomes a protagonist among others. His/her voice is deprived of the pervasive authorial function it used to have in traditional ethnography, whereas the other voices, which were previously confined to the role of sources—“informants”—now may come forward as co-authors. They may even express diverging opinions. This move from “univocity” to “plurivocality”⁶ rocks the foundation of scientific verification and constitutes the most contested part of anthropology’s “literary turn.”⁷

Anthropology's courting of literature seems, however, to have remained unanswered or even dismissed. There has always been a certain highbrow arrogance from literature's side with regard to both journalism and academia. Good-writing anthropologists even used to be called "failed novelists."⁸ And whereas many anthropologists of the post-80s clearly aspire to be regarded as writers also in a literary sense—and often rightfully, so—hardly any literary writer would aspire to being called ethnographer—that might even be taken as an insult—and very few have training in anthropology. There are, however, exceptions to the rule. Among Latin American writers, José María Arguedas, from Peru, and Darcy Ribeiro, from Brazil, were both ethnographers *and* novelists, and both have played very important roles in the formation of a Latin American cultural identity. Their US American colleague Tony Hillerman was an anthropologist of the Nevada desert who wrote detective novels with a Navajo Indian as the main character. And Kurt Vonnegut even had a novel—*Cat's Cradle* (1999 [1963])—accepted as a master's thesis at the University of Chicago in 1971. Vonnegut, who had been accepted as a graduate student already in 1945 and made several attempts at writing a more conventional thesis, but failed, defined cultural anthropology as "a science that is mostly poetry"—or "poetry which pretends to be scientific" (Whitlark 1989: 77). What is more, anthropologists as main protagonists in contemporary literature are rare—which makes Fred Murdoch even more exceptional. As Chilean literary scholar Idelber Avelar notes, everything impels us toward reading "The Ethnographer" as a parable, except that one is not quite sure of what it means (Avelar 2004: 55). For one thing, it is a story about anthropological legibility, which "depicts an encounter with otherness and the re-translation of that encounter back into the language of sameness" (Avelar 2004: 54). At the moment of initiation, the story seems to confirm the possibility that the other may turn out to be transparently legible. But, as the ending of the story makes clear, the immersion in the object also represented the retrospective implosion and dismantling of the research project. "The richness of the story stems from the fact that Borges suggests that [Murdock] never wrote the dissertation precisely *because* his experience as an anthropologist had been too perfect. In other words, Borges portrays anthropology's moment of perfection precisely as its moment of definitive collapse" (Avelar 2004: 55).

In order to decide *not* to write the dissertation, Murdock must be capable of doing it in the first place, and it has taken him several years of arduous work to arrive at that point. So, whereas "The Ethnographer" is certainly a critique of science, it is, at the same time, ascribing anthropology "the privileged space for that kind of interrogation to arise" (Avelar 2004: 57). Did Borges have an analogy with literary writing in mind? Most certainly,

and if he didn't, it is still there, and that is perhaps even the crux of the story. One affinity lies in the shared paradox of the ultimate success that is also the ultimate failure. In order to exist as such, anthropology requires a certain degree of *imperfection*. If the ethnographer fully succeeds in literally becoming the other, he will not be able to retranslate that experience back into the language of his previous self. Full accomplishment, in that sense, would certainly also imply the collapse of art and literature. (There is a fine line here, to the domains of mysticism.) Another analogy, apparently banal but absolutely crucial, is in the very secret disclosed to Murdock that he decides *not* to reveal—and the lesson learned that he *does*, in fact, reveal; that the secret, itself, is not as valuable as the paths that led to it. What immediately comes to mind is the mystery and superstition surrounding the literary inspiration. But to Murdock, the secret is not an inspirational gift, it is something he has achieved in a long process, and it is this process that really matters. The secret could be told “in a hundred different and even contradictory ways”—although Murdock refrains from doing so—but the paths that led him to it—the creative knowledge process—are difficult, not to say impossible, to disclose, even in retrospect.

I had read most of Borges's *ficciones*, as he called his short stories, but for some reason I had missed “The Ethnographer.” When I discovered it, by the end of my project, through Avelar's analysis, I recalled the conversation with one of my Argentinean interviewees, Horacio González, and a reflection that he had made, *en passant*: that one *almost* should not talk about fiction. Because “the ultimate investigation of it would be like revealing a very important secret about the world.” I find this “almost” enormously intriguing. In a way this “almost” is what my whole thesis was about. Unlike Fred Murdock, I wrote my dissertation. And, if I did not have an academic mother discipline on the outset, I felt somehow that I found one in the end. I was very comfortable with anthropology as my subject—because it shares a very crucial feature with literature; it can encompass everything.

Moreover, another intriguing concept finally seemed to make sense: Borges's countryman and colleague Juan José Saer's suggested definition of fiction as *speculative anthropology*. In the key essay “El Concepto de Ficción” (1997 [1989]),⁹ Saer points to fiction's constitutive dual character, which inevitably blends the empirical with the imaginary. The paradox of fiction, according to Saer, is that it takes refuge in the false in order to augment its credibility. This crucial “leap towards the unverifiable” is made, not to immaturely or irresponsibly circumvent the rigors of “truth,” but precisely to demonstrate the complexity of the situation; a complexity that, if approached only from the perspective of the verifiable, would be abusively reduced and impoverished. Hence, the great literary works of our time—al-

though asserting themselves as fiction—claim to be taken literally. However, and this is Saer’s crucial point, *fiction does not solicit being believed as truth, but as fiction.*

This wish is not an artist’s whim but rather the primary condition for his existence, because only by accepting fiction as such can one understand that fiction is not a novelized statement of this or that ideology but a specific dealing with the world, inseparable from what it deals with. This is the crux of the entire problem and it must be kept in mind at all times if one wants to avoid the confusion of genres. Fiction keeps itself at a distance from both the truth prophets and the euphoric advocates of the false (Saer 1989: 12).¹⁰

To illustrate his argument Saer picks two diametrically opposed examples: in the one corner, representing the paradigm of truth: Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The “Finally-Prophesized-Truth” that Solzhenitsyn’s writing claims to tell does not need to validate itself through fiction. Why write a novel on a subject matter about which one already knows everything beforehand? Documents and reports would have been sufficient. The opposite, and likewise negative, example is Umberto Eco, the Italian professor of semiology and specialist in medieval philology, who decides to write novels for amusement or, in Saer’s scornful words, *entertainment for executives to read between airports.* While Solzhenitsyn proposes the grand revelation, Eco soothingly reassures that there is nothing new under the sun. Antiquity and modernity mingle; the detective story is transposed to the Middle Ages, which, in turn, become a metaphor for the present, and history is given meaning through an incredible conspiracy. This “apology of the false” seems in Saer’s analysis far more despicable than Solzhenitsyn’s prophetic claims.¹¹

What Saer then finally arrives at is this tentative definition of fiction as a *speculative anthropology.* However, as if exhausted by the enormous intellectual effort, he never properly elaborates this captivating conclusion, but ends on a puzzling and somewhat disappointing note:

Perhaps—I do not dare to assert it—this way of looking at fiction could neutralize the various reductionisms that, ever since the last century, have persistently lashed out at it. Through this lens, fiction might be able, not to ignore them, but to assimilate them, incorporating them to its own essence and stripping them of their pretensions of being absolute. Yet this subject is arduous, and it is better left for another time (Saer 1997: 16).

Unfortunately, this other occasion never occurs—so we can only speculate on the deeper implications, or see the concept as an open suggestion, to follow up on. The word *speculative* may of course sound derogatory. In academia it

is seldom if ever an asset to be speculative. You may make daring hypotheses, but then you are supposed to find empirical evidence to support them, whereas speculation is synonymous with gambling or talking off the top of your head. But Saer quite obviously uses the word in an affirmative sense—speculative as *uninhibited, unpredictable, transgressive*.

After five years of arduous academic discipline, it was a great relief to go back to writing fiction. My latest project has been the completion of a major literary endeavor, a novel trilogy, *Argentinatrilogin (The Argentina Trilogy)*, consisting of the three novels *Cosmos & Aska* (2000), *Santiago* (2007), and *Misiones* (2014).¹² I would not say that these projects have run in parallel, because I can only be engaged in one major writing process at a time. But they have certainly informed each other—and in retrospect I can clearly see how they are really two different approaches to a common group of themes.

The title of the concluding part of the trilogy, *Misiones*, had been in the back of my head ever since I wrote the second part, *Santiago*, or even earlier, and I would certainly have written it a long time ago if the dissertation had not come in between. But then, it would certainly have become a quite different novel. On the one hand, the systematic research into the ethnographic and historic material that I was beginning to explore in *Santiago* provided my writing with a more solid ground. On the other, and more importantly, the subsequent greater confidence in my own authority enhanced my ability and motivation to *invent* more freely.¹³ For example, *Misiones* is a province in northeastern Argentina with a fairly large and largely unknown community of Swedish immigrants who arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I had been there twice, very briefly, and I was always planning to go back and do some proper ethnographic research for my novel. But in the end I decided to write the novel first, completely based on imagination and not making use of any of the “real” history.¹⁴

Hence, in the end, the *literariness* of my literary approach was actually emphasized, and the distinction between the genres clarified rather than blurred. So, what about *transgression*? To what extent do the ethnographic and literary practices truly converge? Is it even desirable *that* they fuse into new genres? These are questions that I am still struggling with. My dissertation abided by the academic rules, but it actually also had “literary” offspring in a hybrid text, “Hillbrow Blues,” that was first written and published in Swedish and later elaborated and published in English (Hemer 2012b). Its background is that I was invited to contribute to a literary anthology. At first I declined, explaining that I didn’t have any material in store and no time to produce new text, since I was immersed in my research project. But the editor was insistent, and I am happy that he was because it inspired me to write something I most likely would not have produced without a sharp deadline. The first Swedish version was written while I was working on the South Af-

rican material, more specifically on a chapter about “writing the city,” that is, Johannesburg. So, it was a way of approaching the same material from a slightly different perspective. The English version, which is more than a mere translation, was also written in response to a call, for an anthology to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of the yearly *Time of the Writer* Festival in Durban (in which I had participated in 2007). That was an even greater challenge; it is the first literary text I have written in English.

It goes fast. Pretoria Street is shorter than he remembered it; he’s looking for the hotel on the right side whose name he has repressed, no, simply forgotten, but he doesn’t see any signs at all, nor any traces of bookshops, cafés, or lunch restaurants. Lots of people in the street, mostly young men, no suits or ties, a few older women, no commerce, shutters closed, the entire Carlton Hotel shut down like a ghost tower, the garage doors locked with chains, but no roadblocks or burning oil drums. . . . “The Nigerians and the Zimbabweans have ruined the place,” says the taxi driver with a matter-of-fact distaste that reminds him of his first taxi ride in Joburg fifteen years ago, that time with a white driver venting his contempt over the black hordes that had invaded the formerly secluded city. He stayed in the hotel whose name he doesn’t remember, with a view to the street, noisy, without air conditioning, cockroaches in the bathroom but otherwise neat and tidy. Apartheid was already history, like communism in Eastern Europe, TV showed Hill Street Blues dubbed to seSotho (*he believes*), interspersed with commercials for Ohlsson’s Lager, the beer for the New South Africa in the making. Double-deckers ran like shuttles along Hillbrow’s busy artery, studded with shops, cinemas, bars, and restaurants where you could have breakfast at any time of the day; a block or two farther down were 24-hour cafés and bookshops, some of them amalgamated into book cafés. At Café Zurich, he had met Ivan Vladislavić, then in his early thirties, editor at the semi-clandestine Ravan Press and the author of a well-received collection of short stories. He retained the memory of Ivan’s smile, leaning on the red PVC-coated sofa in the spacious venue. Café Zurich was to merge with nearby Café de Paris into the imaginary Café Europa, the center around which Hillbrow’s and South Africa’s transition evolves in the eyes and mind of retired proofreader Aubrey Tearle, the main protagonist of *The Restless Supermarket* (2001), a regular at the café and, in his own words, an incorrigible European, although he has never set foot outside South Africa.

As the opening paragraph above indicates, this is not an academic text. Yet, in bits and pieces it is identical with corresponding parts of my dissertation, which also has the literary elements of essay, reportage, and memoir. The difference is the component that would be defined as *fictional*; the stream of consciousness, the subjective distortion of reality—in the memory of the protagonist, the images of this taxi ride along Pretoria Street merge with other images into a slightly surreal cityscape—and, perhaps most importantly, the

distancing device of the third person. That was something that I added in the English version, and I discovered that it really made a great difference. “He” is not “me.” I’m not exactly sure who he is, where he comes from, or where he is going. So, it is a fiction. And it is ethnographic in the sense that it is conveying the experience of a real place; solemn as it may sound, even attempting to capture the spirit of this place. It’s not one journey, but a condensation of many journeys, and with two registers in time, a now and a past; in this case, Johannesburg, South Africa, before and after the transition.

After the Hillbrow Blues, I have written a corresponding text about Bangalore, India, “Bengaluru Boogie” (Hemer 2015), and I am currently continuing these kind of transdisciplinary explorations that I, for lack of a sexier term, call *ethnographic fictions*. But what this tentative enterprise in the end may entail remains to be revealed.

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NOTES

1. The short essay is a brilliant reflection on the act of writing as a complex act of communication between a self and an other. Borrowing Jean-Paul Sartre’s description of Jean Genet’s writing, Crapanzano suggests a definition of this act as *talking to oneself, though wanting to be heard*, with reference to Sartre (1964: 494).
2. *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*. I did several series of “essay reportages” from Africa, Latin America, and Asia during the 1990s. Some of them were eventually republished in the books *Andra Städer—3 essäreportage från Syd* (1993, *Other Cities—Three Essay Reportages from South*) and *Kuba & Kina—2 postkommunistiska reportage* (1996, *Cuba & China—Two Post-Communist Reportages*).
3. *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* was the title-story of Borges’s first collection of short stories (1941), which was republished in its entirety in *Ficciones* (1944, in English in 1962). The story “The Garden of Forking Paths” was also the first of Borges’s works to be translated into English, in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, in August 1948.
4. He traces its tradition to Herodotus, on the one hand, and Montesquieu’s Persian traveler on the other, hence inscribing the estrangement of fiction in its very origin.

5. It is symptomatic of this “split personality” that Laura Bohannan wrote the memoir of her fieldwork as a novel under a different name (Bruner 1993).
6. French Jesuit philosopher Michel de Certeau noted that the fictions of literary language were scientifically condemned (and aesthetically appreciated) for lacking *univocity*, the purportedly unambiguous accounting of natural science and professional history. Literary fiction, by contrast, is inherently unstable; “it narrates one thing in order to tell something else; it delineates itself in a language from which it continuously draws effects of meaning that cannot be circumscribed or checked” (De Certeau 1983: 128, quoted in Clifford 2010: 5). *Plurivocality* is defined by Russian literary theorist Michail Bakhtin as one of the essential elements of the novel.
7. The experimental moment that reached momentum in the late 80s and early 90s is also known as the “postmodern turn.” *Writing Culture* was indeed a product of the 80s, but its lasting importance cannot be overestimated. In a sense it came as a shock that anthropology still hasn’t quite recovered from. A twenty-fifth anniversary edition was published last year, with a new foreword by Kim Fortun, a leading representative of the new generation of anthropologists that has been shaped by the *Writing Culture* critique.
8. The catchy concept *novelist manqué* is attributed to British anthropologist Edmund Leach, who quite unanimously is considered to have been one of the best writer-ethnographers in the English language.
9. This crucial text has given its title to an entire collection of essays (Saer 1997), ranging over three decades, from 1965 to 1996.
10. English translation by Paula Grossman and Alejandra Rogante.
11. The vehement contempt unleashed upon Eco is quite perplexing in the light of current tendencies in the global literary industry. One need not wonder what Saer would have thought of Dan Brown. What Saer suggests may in fact be that the worldwide success of Eco’s *Il Nome della Rosa* (1981, *The Name of The Rose*) in a way paved the way for Brown and the like.
12. *Misiones* was published separately and with the two previous novels in one volume as an e-book, *Argentinariogin*.
13. Ivan Vladislavić, one of my South African interviewees, suggested that there is not enough invention in literature and called for more writers who would simply make things up (Hemer 2012a: 96).
14. In fact, it is set in the near future, when intercontinental air traffic has been canceled, waves of refugees and other migrants are once again traveling by boat from the old to the new world, and Argentina appears at last to realize its enormous potential.

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