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Chapter 9

Writing and methodology: Literary texts as ethnographic data and creative writing as a means of investigation

Oscar Hemer

Strangely enough, writing is not usually associated with methodology. That is, in handbooks on methodology, there is rarely if ever any mentioning of writing as a method of research. It is regarded as the tool for conveying the results, and there may be some suggestions on how to write up your paper/thesis in a required format. Whereas writing style is crucial for a literary writer or a journalist, in academia, it is not only strikingly subordinated; it is even met with suspicion, as if eloquence were a way of concealing a meagre academic content. Hence, in this line of argument, the duller the text, the more significant the research behind it. This observation applies to all the social sciences, and not least anthropology, as expressed in US American anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt’s often-quoted remark:

How, one asks constantly, could such interesting people doing such interesting things produce such dull books? (Pratt 1986: 33)
Pratt’s colleague and countryman, Vincent Crapanzano explains this seeming paradox as 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)

Both Pratt and Crapanzano were contributors to the very influential anthology *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus 1986), which marked the beginning of what has been called anthropology’s *literary turn*. But the quote above is from a previous short essay, which brilliantly reflects on the act of writing as a complex act of communication between a self and an other. Crapanzano suggests a definition of this act as *talking to oneself, though wanting to be heard*.\(^1\) I find that definition very intriguing, and applicable to all forms of creative writing, be it academic, journalistic or literary.\(^2\)

**Writing truth**

In my research on contemporary writing in South Africa and Argentina (Hemer 2012) it struck me that most of the writers that I analyzed and interviewed were academics besides being fiction writers, whereas in Scandinavia it is much more common to combine literary writing with journalism. The prime example of the writer/academic would be Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee. To readers outside South Africa, he is almost exclusively known as a novelist, but his work as a critic and essayist is almost as extensive as his fiction. And the relation between the two writing practices

\(^1\) The phrase is actually borrowed from Jean-Paul Sartre’s description of Jean Genet’s writing.

\(^2\) Those are the three principal writing practices whose interrelations I have elsewhere illustrated with a like-sided triangle (Hemer 2005, 2012). From my own experience as a practitioner of the three genres, I claim that all forms of creative writing happen in the dynamic tension between these 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.
is a crucial concern to him. In *Doubling the Point* (1992), a volume of essays interspersed with interviews which spans over two decades, from 1970 to 1990, 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 contrary, 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).

The interviewer and editor David Atwell returns again and again to Coetzee’s double perspective, as a critic and a fiction writer, and finally Coetzee quite frankly declares that he feels a greater freedom to follow where his thinking takes him when he is writing fiction. 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 a 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 onwards, the two formerly separate yet communicating practices have been combined, and even fused, in more and less innovative ways.

Argentinean writer Carlos Gamerro expresses a very similar view on literary writing as opposed to discursive forms of writing.

When I really don’t know where I stand regarding a certain issue, I personally feel like writing fiction rather than an essay or a more conceptual piece. So, writing fiction is a way to research not only the problem itself, but also where I stand in relation to the problem. That’s why I sometimes say that I write non-committed political fiction. Because the idea of
commitment presupposes that one already has a position to defend, to propose or to explain through fiction. I believe that if I wanted to do that, it would be easier for me to write an article or give an interview. Fiction exists for other purposes (Gamerro in Hemer 2012: 380).

Gamerro’s novel *El secreto y las voces* (2002) is an excellent example of this interrogation by means of fiction. It is a story about the role of the ordinary citizens during the last military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-83), which was partly inspired by the controversy around US American political scientist Daniel Goldhagen’s book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (1996), on the German common citizen’s alleged complicity in the Holocaust. In Argentina, immediately after the fall of the Junta, it was a common statement that “nobody knew” about the atrocities in the detention centers where some 15,000 people were “disappeared”. That was of course not true, but neither was the common saying a few years later that “everybody knew”. It is this indefinite space between “nobody” and “everybody” that Gamerro interrogates in the novel, set in a small town of three thousand inhabitants, where a former resident returns many years after the events to try to disclose what actually happened.

And there you have a panorama with the perspectives of many individuals, a social structure, interests, classes, ages, sexes etc. This allowed me to raise the issue without appealing to a discourse on truth, which is what Goldhagen aims at doing. Goldhagen’s discourse, that “every German is responsible for the Holocaust” can easily be refuted, just by taking the example of Hannah Arendt. As a hypothesis, it can neither be proven nor disproven. Here is where I believe fiction has an advantage over any other discipline (Gamerro in Hemer 2012: 381).

From a Communication for Development perspective, the idea of fiction as a way of exploring what you do not know may seem far-fetched or irrelevant. ComDev is strongly affiliated with a tradition of vertical behaviour-change communication, ”diffusion of innovations”, spreading
the gospel of modernization, liberal democracy, human rights, etc. Fiction does indeed play an increasingly important role in these strategic communication ventures, but mostly in an instrumental way, as a means to reach out to wide audiences, through education-entertainment - "edutainment." The instrumental use of fiction in strategic communication is certainly contrary to the conception of writing as an intuitive knowledge process, but that does not necessarily imply that they are incompatible.

**Holistic interpretation**

To regard writing itself as methodology, even the primary means of exploration, was not an active choice of mine; it was something that evolved in the process of writing, when I eventually realized that what I was doing was a kind of ethnography. My readings and interviews formed part of an attempted *holistic interpretation* of the contemporary South African and Argentinean societies. The ethnographic approach is in that respect very similar to that of an investigative journalist. In my exploration I was, in a way, a foreign correspondent, although not in the conventional sense. My primary aim was not to report “home” to a Scandinavian audience. Although it may sound pretentious, I’d rather see myself as a transnational mediator and facilitator between the Argentinean and the South African cultural and intellectual spheres.

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3 Edutainment had its breakthrough as a prominent medium for HIV/Aids communication, with success stories such as *Femina HIP* in Tanzania, *Puntos de Encuentro* in Nicaragua and the much-discussed *Soul City* of South Africa (Hemer & Tufte 2005).

4 Many TV-series with an edutainment component, not least in South Africa, are of high artistic quality, and have played a significant, pro-active role in the fractured public sphere. The key to their success is however most likely that they resemble ordinary soap operas or TV series, with characters that are complex and contradictory, as real-life characters are.

5 In the introduction to *Writing Culture*, James Clifford describes ethnography as *hybrid textual activity*, traversing genres and disciplines. *Ethnographic writing*, in Clifford's generous understanding, encompasses the historical predecessors of explorers' journals and travelers' reports, and evidently borders on both journalism and literature. Ethnographers were, indeed, the forerunners of colonial expansion, but they were also world reporters before the very notion of “foreign news”. The commonalities between foreign correspondents and anthropologists have been explored by, among others, Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (2004).
The principal ethnographic method, the participant observation, has also been a favoured 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 the famous fly-on-the-wall - or, with a more apposite metaphor, one 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”. It is this prevailing subjective/objective balance that cracks in ”the literary turn”, starting with a sub-genre that Clifford calls the self-reflexive “fieldwork account”. In the reflection on the fieldwork 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 “plurivocality”, resembling the shifting subject positions of a novel, rocked the foundation of scientific verification and constituted the most contested part of anthropology’s “literary turn” (also known as ”the postmodern turn”).

**Speculative anthropology**

Anthropology’s courting of literature remained, however, 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”. And whereas many anthropologists of the post-80s clearly aspire to be regarded as writers also in a literary sense, for a literary writer to be called ethnographer would most likely be taken for an insult.

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6 It is symptomatic of this “split personality” that US American anthropologist Laura Bohannan wrote the memoir of her fieldwork in Nigeria, *Return to Laughter* (1954), as a novel under the pseudonym Elizabeth Smith Bowen.

7 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 main character. And Kurt Vonnegut even had a novel – *Cat's Cradle* (1963) - accepted as a Master thesis at the University of Chicago in
Nevertheless, in one of the key theoretical texts of my investigation, Argentinean writer Juan José Saer’s essay *El concepto de ficción* (1989), I came across the intriguing suggested definition of fiction as *speculative anthropology*. Saer points to fiction’s constitutive dual character, which inevitably blends the empirical with the imaginary. The paradox of fiction is that it takes refuge in the false in order to augment its credibility. Although asserting themselves as fiction, the great literary works of our time claim to be taken literally. However, and this is Saer’s crucial point, *fiction does not solicit being believed as truth, but as fiction*.

Saer never further elaborates on the notion of fiction as speculative anthropology, so we can only speculate on its deeper implications, or see the concept as a tentative suggestion. 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. Yet, Saer quite obviously uses the word in an affirmative sense – speculative as *uninhibited, unpredictable, transgressive*… An anthropology freed of delimiting constraints, able to wander off in any direction. Yet an *anthropology*, that is, engaging with the world and with the human being.

We might perhaps add *provocative* to the list above. In a lucid reflection on "transcultural research as encounter", British cultural sociologist Kevin Robins refers to the ethnographic film *Chronique d’un été* (1960), by the French anthropologist-filmmaker Jean Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin, as an example of "radical and questioning empiricism – far beyond what we might call the cold interview" (Robins 2014: 31). The film, which proposes an active intervention in life (*verité provoquée*) sets out to unsettle and disturb, to film "not life as it is, but life as it is
provoked” as Rouch has explained in an interview (Robins 2014: 31) The film-maker/ethnographer leaves the role as passive observer and becomes a catalytic figure that progressively brings people together, asking provocative questions, encouraging collaboration or confrontation, but not knowing on beforehand what kind of truth this process of catalysis will produce.\(^8\) The writer/director as catalyst for (social) change is in my view a notion with immense potential implications for the field of Communication for Development.

**Literature as ethnographic data**

So far I have briefly outlined some approaches to fiction as a means of exploration, even dramatization/enactment, from the (literary) writer’s point of view. But let us now turn the perspective around and look at literary texts from the social scientist’s (ComDev researcher/practitioner’s) viewpoint. How does his/her reading of these works differ from the literary scholar’s – or the literary writer’s? Can works of fiction at all be assessed as *ethnographic* data?

Lately, literature and other forms of artistic expression have gained increasing interest in development studies, as *representation* of development.\(^9\) The idea that you may learn about a society/culture by reading its literature may seem uncontroversial, even trivial, but this research orientation, heralded by scholars with a background in anthropology, has been a long time in coming, in spite of the still contested literary turn. The common understanding, or prejudice, of an ethnographer remains the participant observer of distant *other* cultures - the more other and the more remote, the better. He or she goes to live there for a long time, a year at least, to make first-

\(^8\)The stated intention was, in Morin's words, to “extract a truth which hides or disguises itself or remains below the surface of appearances” (Morin 1962, quoted in Robins 2013: 32), and, most importantly, it should be “a new type of truth consisting of a dialogue between observer and observed, with the observer asking the observed to reveal something which could not emerge without the meeting” (Morin 1962, quoted in Robins 2013: 32, italics in original). The principle of this methodology of encounter and improvisation is described as that of *the open door to the unexpected*.

\(^9\)See for example Lewis, Rodgers & Woolcock 2013
hand observations in the field. Those are the ethnographic data, obtained through watching and
listening. Not reading, in a literal sense, because there is usually nothing to read. S/he may of course
bring some essential ethnographic works as a travel library, for reference, and possibly even one or
two books of fiction, for leisure, to escape the sufferings and hardships of the isolation and the
abstinence from the material goods of modern civilization, but they would have little, if anything, to
do with the field research and gathering of data.

Although the studied other culture has traditionally been illiterate, in the sense that the
“informants” have not been able to read or write, it has of course not been void of literary
imagination. Every culture has a tradition of stories and myths, usually associated with religion and
ritual. But it has most often been an oral tradition, and the literary texts – if there were any – would
form part of the solid body of cultural tradition… the lore of the culture. Most anthropologists
would probably still associate literary sources primarily, or even exclusively, with folklore.

But what happens when the anthropologist moves from the typical remote traditional culture
to the complexity of modern, urban, highly literate, societies? How should s/he relate to the literary
texts of these societies, by indigenous writers, who are sometimes attempting to analyse society and
culture, and often – deliberately or not - contributing to the shaping of the same society’s self-
understanding? Norwegian anthropologist Marit Melhuus posed this question in Exploring the
Written (1994), one of the many anthologies on Literature and Anthropology that followed Writing
Culture in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s. Melhuus specifically explores how anthropologists doing
fieldwork in Mexico have referred to the work of Octavio Paz, and especially the widely influential
collection of essays El laberinto de la soledad (1950)\textsuperscript{10}, whose explications of the mestizo identity
(Mexicanness) have raised extensive debate in Mexico and in Latin America as a whole. How can
anthropologists assess this text? Should they appropriate Paz directly – a partner-in-crime, as

\textsuperscript{10} Eng. The Labyrinth of Solitude. Life and Thought in Mexico (1961).
Melhuus puts it – or should they rather enter into dialogue with him? And who and what does his authority represent, as compared to others that express opinions about Mexican society (including the anthropologist)? By expounding on these questions Melhuus lucidly demonstrates the prevailing bewilderment among anthropologists in addressing literary sources.

And yet, Paz may seem like a comparatively non-complicated case. The Labyrinth of Solitude can well be defined as a form of interpretative ethnography. It is indeed a work of creative imagination, and speculation, if you like, as literary essays by definition are. But it undoubtedly claims to be truthful and based on factual evidence. Paz’s interpretation of the Mexican mestizo culture is literature, but not fiction. If we for the time being dwell in Mexico, it becomes more complicated to assess the other contemporary literary giant, Paz’s colleague and adversary Carlos Fuentes, whose entire literary production deals with Mexican history and identity, but in novelistic form. His magnum opus Terra Nostra (1975) is like a baroque fresco of, not only Mexico, but also the entire Spanish-speaking world at its imperial heyday in the 16th and 17th centuries. It is a prime example of the so-called total novel. Terra Nostra does of course contain ethnographic and historical data, although it is obviously not a very reliable source for factual information, since these data are filtered through and possibly completely distorted by the imagination of Carlos Fuentes. But, as Marit Melhuus notes, a text – any text deemed relevant by the anthropologist – can be categorized either as data (that is, ethnography) or as a context for interpreting the data. Apparently, it is the latter categorization that might apply to a novel like Terra Nostra. But then the text ought quite obviously to be put in an even larger context – not only

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11 He has, himself, in retrospect, described it as “an exercise of the critical imagination; a vision and at the same time a re-vision” (Paz 1984 [1970]: 10, quoted in Melhuus 1994: 84).

12 Fuentes was the most prolific and, in my view perhaps the most innovative of the four writers that are usually associated with the so-called Latin American boom in the 1960s and ’70s. The other three are Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa.

13 Totality is perhaps not very fashionable among writers today. But, as Carlos Gamerro notes, one of the distinctive features of literature, as opposed to journalism and academic writing, is that it can make a bet for totality (Gamerro, interviewed by the author in Hemer 2012: 385).
national (Mexican), or regional (Latin American), but also trans-national and even trans-cultural. The Latin American literary boom, for which Terra Nostra could be regarded as the symbolic culmination, was Latin America’s moment of literary world fame, and played a substantial role in shaping an image that is still largely prevailing in the global imaginary. Ask yourself what you associate with Latin America! I’m quite sure that one of the things that pop up in your mind is the notion of magical realism.

Four approaches

But even if we agree that novels and other works of fiction – even the most obscure or bizarre ones – can be subject to a social science analysis, the question remains: to what purpose? What does the elusive literary text add to other, more solid ethnographic data, like field notes, news reports, witness testimonies, etc.? And what would a supposedly blunt ethnographic reading of that fictional text add to the presumably more sophisticated literary analysis?

To answer the second question first: The literary analysis – the critique of the work – is generally of little help to the social scientist, since it is primarily or even exclusively concerned with the text itself. The social and cultural context is of subordinated importance, or even regarded as insignificant. The primary context in the literary analysis would be that of other literary texts.14 Whereas an anthropological interpretation necessarily refers to something beyond the text; what Melhuus defines as “the lived experience of men and women”. This may, at first glance, indeed seem like a blunt reduction of literature to simple reference, reminiscent of the “realist” and “activist” position in the debates of the ’70s and ’80s - against the allegedly detached “aestheticism” of writers like Jorge Luis Borges or, for that matter, Coetzee. Ethnographic reading is reductionist; it does not consider aesthetic or artistic qualities. A media and communication or cultural studies

14An exception to that rule is to be found in postcolonial studies, for which postcolonial literature has always been a cornerstone, explicating the transformational processes of globalization, migration etc. Postcolonial thought emanates primarily from literary studies, as in Edward Said’s groundbreaking Orientalism (1978) For a more recent example, see Ashcroft 2001.
reading may seem to be somewhere in-between. If literature were regarded primarily as a *medium*, the focus would be on its communication power; that is, its *reception*, not among critics but among a wider audience. Culture and media studies are therefore mainly, if not only, interested in what we still refer to as *popular* literature.\(^{15}\) A fourth approach that I suggest would be the writer’s perspective. It may seem like a very exclusive one, and of course not at par with the others in terms of numbers or pretensions. Yet it is the perspective that I tried to assume in my investigation of the transition processes of South Africa and Argentina, and I claim that it adds something to the others, although it is difficult to define exactly what that contribution may be. I am not thinking of the writer’s perspective on his/her own work, which is largely a blind spot. Moreover, when writers *do* try to analyse their own work, the self-reflection runs the risk of appearing as primitive, or even irrelevant, in comparison to that which is inscribed in the structure of the literary work itself.\(^{16}\) A writer’s reading of other writer’s work may only be slightly different than that of the literary critic, but it will probably have a better understanding of, and greater interest in, the craft of writing and the literary creation process. In this respect, the literary writer’s perspective is closer to that of the ethnographer (and the reporter) than that of the critic; he/she is immersed in whatever material he/she is working on and trying to make sense of it. This sense is never fully grasped by the writer; yet it is nevertheless contained in the work. What I’m getting at is of course the complementarity of these different approaches. They all have their biases and blind spots. They are all reductionist, in different ways. The writer’s perspective, for example, tends to discard the audience aspect, which is the crucial aspect for the culture and media analysis. From the writer’s perspective, the value of a literary work has little, if anything, to do with the size of the readership – or the number of languages to which it has been translated.

\(^{15}\) The old dichotomy of “high” and “low” culture is *not* over-ruled, although the borders have been increasingly blurred. But there was never necessarily a correlation between popularity and low quality – or between high quality and exclusivity.)


**Conceptual repertoire**

But let us return to the question of reference between the literary work and the social and cultural reality — *the lived experience of men and women*. I think we can agree on that as a criterion for the ethnographic interest in a literary text, as long as “lived experience” is not confined to the depiction of “real lives” — that is, biographical or documentary accounts. But does it also need to have a social impact? Is it interesting, from an ethnographic point of view, only in-so-far as it has a detectable influence on the lived experience of men and women? V. S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) had for example arguably a greater influence on Trinidian self-understanding and identity politics than any work of Paz or Fuentes ever had in Mexico. The fictionalized story of Naipaul’s own father was, in Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s words, “instrumental in the forging of a genuinely Indo-Trinidadian identity”. It ”contributed to raising a certain historical consciousness”, and it gave, in its time, ”expression and articulation to hitherto muted concerns” (Eriksen 1994: 184). But would *A House for Mr Biswas* be of interest even if its readership had been confined to a tiny Trinidadian diaspora in London? This is to me a crucial, and disturbing question.

Eriksen does not produce any evidence for his strong statements. There is simply no way to quantitatively measure such intangible impact on something equally elusive as a collective imaginary. Yet hardly anyone would dispute that some specific works of fiction have played decisive roles in history. But how can the social scientist – or any researcher – assess this transformative potential of the literary imagination? Indian American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has outlined an anthropology of literature that breaks out of the national framing that still marks both anthropology and literature, and which focuses on a more general *ethnography of the imagination*. He uses a concept that I find very helpful: *conceptual repertoire*. Fiction, like myth, is

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*Söderblom 2009, quoted in Hemer 2012: 42*
part of the conceptual repertoire of contemporary societies, and fiction writers often contribute to the construction of social and moral maps for their readers (Appadurai 1996: 58).

Literature was arguably the principal medium for both modernization and nationalism, which often went hand-in-hand. Many post-colonial writers, not least in Africa, actively contributed to the nation-building process. Others, like Naipaul, did it inadvertently. Yet, it is hard to imagine that any novel anywhere today would have a social and cultural impact that even faintly compares to that of *A House for Mr Biswas*, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, or, for that matter, Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad*. In order to compete in today’s mediatized world, the literary text would have to be transposed to a visual medium, that is, film or TV. The role that novels played in the late 19th and the larger part of the 20th century has been resoundingly taken over by TV series, with characters like Tony Soprano and Carrie Mathison starring in a transnational, if not global, imaginary. Although still intrinsically linked to the notion of the public sphere, and, usually but not necessarily, to the imagined community of a nation (-state), the conceptual repertoire of any society is of course changing over time. Fictional characters come and go. Some last by their own force. Others may require the support of cultural policies.

Each Scandinavian country has its own repertoire, but also shares parts of this national repertoire with the others. For example, the genuinely Norwegian character *Askeladden* is practically unknown outside Norway, whereas Nora and Peer Gynt are shared not only by other Scandinavians; they form part of a larger Western, even global conceptual repertoire, and will most probably continue to do so, by way of new translations and interpretations – just like the characters of Shakespeare, or the heroes of Mahābhārata and Rāmāyana. But what about Jonas Wergeland, the main protagonist of Jan Kjærstad’s great trilogy of the ’90s?17 Is he also part of the Norwegian/Scandinavian conceptual repertoire? I would claim yes, even if he may cling to a frail

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17 *Førfreren, Erobreren and Oppdageren* (*The Seducer, The Conqueror and The Discoverer).*
position in the margin, over-shadowed by the Wallanders and Salanders of the celebrated Nordic Noir. And I actually believe that he stands a better chance of survival than most of the media-hyped characters that have later, momentarily, stood at the centre of public attention. For a future ethnographer who wishes to explore the Norwegian (Scandinavian) society of the latter half of the 20th century I believe that Kjærstad's trilogy provides a much richer, more multifaceted material than, for example, Stieg Larsson’s Millennium trilogy. Because aesthetic or artistic qualities cannot and should not be entirely discarded by the social scientist. The author’s subjective interpretation and analysis of the ethnographic and historical data is an inseparable part of the literary work as ethnographic data. It is precisely this elusive surplus value that constitutes the literary quality; that which makes Kjaerstad’s novel trilogy an ampler ethnographic material than the documented life-story of a real person, or a mere chronicle of news events that spans over the same post-war period. I claim, in other words, that literary texts are indispensable ethnographic data, not only through their reception or social impact, but also in and by themselves. In order to fully assess the ethnographic qualities of a literary text, there is therefore need for a cross-disciplinary approach. Ethnographic analysis alone is not enough.

Rewriting history

I’ll give two examples from my own investigation to underpin this argument. I will not pick any of the most obvious and well-known works from South Africa, Coetzee’s novel Disgrace - or Antjie Krog’s semi-fictional reportage from the TRC, Country of My Skull. They are both widely debated and disputed, in South Africa and abroad. (Disgrace is possibly the most analysed contemporary novel anywhere.) Hardly anybody would contest that the two works are pivotal reflections of the South African transition process and indispensable references for anyone who wishes to make a holistic analysis of the early transition period. So, instead, I choose a little known novel from the same time, Zoë Wicomb’s David’s Story (2000). Wicomb belongs to the specific South African
racial category of *coloureds*, that is, those of mixed race, or brown complexion, who, according to apartheid logic, are neither black nor white. The refusal to affirm this complex and shame-laden identity is a recurrent theme in both her academic work and her fiction.

*David’s Story* explores a core aspect of the South African experience, which has been negated and effectively repressed: *creolization*. David, the main protagonist, is a former freedom fighter from Cape Town who engages a (woman) writer to tell his story. The narrator, coloured like himself and bearing a certain resemblance to the author of the novel is, however, not provided with the full story and hence left to fill in the blanks. There is, for example, a significant relationship to a woman, Dulcie, a heroine of the struggle who, for some reason, had fallen into disgrace with the ANC. The year is 1991, the violent interregnum years between the release of Nelson Mandela and the first democratic elections. David, on a journey to Kokstad in former Griqualand, is doing an exploration into his own *Griqua* ancestry and, hence, into a little known and dubiously-documented part of the history of the Cape colony. The Griqua were originally descendants of the indigenous Khoi people who travelled north to set up their own independent state and were joined in their mission by runaway and freed slaves, people of mixed race and a few whites, who all assumed the Griqua identity. The Griqua journey in search of the Promised Land bears a striking resemblance to the Boers’ parallel *Great Trek* to escape British colonial rule, and the two migrant groups had more than myths and religion (Christianity) in common: they shared the creolized Dutch which would eventually develop into Afrikaans. But while the Boers, later called Afrikaners, were more and more concerned with identifying themselves as white, the Griqua embraced a variety of ethnicities, and racial mixing was an acknowledged part of Griquanness. *David’s Story* gives a fragmented reconstruction of the various Griqua migrations and settlements from the early 19th century to the 1930s, when the late leader Andrew Le Fleur struggles to establish a separate homeland for a separate Griqua race – in other words following an ideological line that would later cohere with
apartheid policy and portend, as Wicomb puts it, “the shameful vote of Cape coloureds for the National Party in the first democratic elections”.

In its general outlines and details, the novel’s historical account is faithful to documented fact. But David and his narrator distort the picture by insinuating a connection between the Griqua leader Le Fleur and “the father of biology”, Georges Cuvier, professor of animal anatomy at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. In South Africa he is forever associated with the tragic fate of Sarah (Saartjie) Baartman. Advertised as “the Hottentot Venus” and displayed in a cage, she had toured Europe as a curious blend of vaudeville actress and ethnological museum exhibit before ending up as a destitute alcoholic and prostitute in Paris, where Cuvier and his colleagues examined and depicted her as an exemplary specimen of the black race. After her early death, Saartjie Baartman’s genitals, brain and skeleton were put on display at Musée de l’Homme in Paris until 1974, when they were removed to a back room. One of Nelson Mandela’s first requests as the new president of South Africa was that France return the remains. The French National Assembly finally acceded to the request in 2002 and Sarah Baartman, who was already part of the South African conceptual repertoire at the time when David’s Story was published, became one of the key symbolic protagonists of the transition. Her burial, in the Gamtoos river valley in the Eastern Cape, was a spectacle of nation-building, declared by President Thabo Mbeki to be an “important day and occasion in our national life” (Samuelson 2007: 88-89).

If the return of Sarah Baartman’s remains was “one of several initiatives towards reconstructing a national cultural past” (Wicomb 1998: 91), the novel’s witty reinvention of history aims, rather, at deconstructing the national myths, also in the new democratic state’s over-simplified discourse of “rainbow nationalism”. David’s Story touches upon many tabooed issues: the

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18 Baartman’s case gained world-wide reputation after it was rediscovered by biologist Stephen Jay Gold in the essay collection The Flamingo’s Smile: Reflections in natural history (1985). Her case has received renewed international attention through French Tunisian director Abdellatif Kechiche’s feature film Vénus noire (2010).
mistreatment of dissidents in the ANC detention camps and, more generally, the sexual abuse of women by their male comrades throughout the liberation struggle. Both David and Dulcie obviously have a connection to the most infamous camp in Angola, but it remains unclear what their respective roles were. David may even have been one of Dulcie’s lover-torturers. His own story to the narrator both reveals and conceals ANC atrocities, reflecting his ambivalence about what he sees as inevitable violence in revolutionary times. The narrator’s refusal to judge or condemn is a crucial feature of the novel’s method; it investigates the past and present without any sense of political rectitude, nor even moral authority. The provisionality of truth is one of Wicomb’s major themes, and the novel’s scepticism is self-reflexive as well. David’s Story is certainly articulating hitherto muted concerns, and, potentially, enhancing historical consciousness. What it provides is a critique of the transition, and the conception of the New South Africa, that breaks the still prevailing racialized black-and-white dichotomy – which not even Coetzee is able to escape.

**Passion and vengeance**

My Argentinean example is a story by Borges, a sworn enemy of realism and perhaps the last writer you would associate with ethnographic data. His stories, *ficciones*, are often regarded, by fans and foes alike, as a purely literary universe, an eco-chamber of allegories and allusions, tigers and mirrors, full of irony and understatement; like the story of Pierre Ménard who writes an exact copy of Cervantes’ Don Quijote, or the cartographer who makes a map of the Empire in the scale 1:1. But Borges is also famous for his stories about rude honour, bravery, passion and vengeance, set in the province of Buenos Aires or in the suburbs of the growing metropolis. This story, *El otro duelo* (*The Other Duel*) is from his collection *El informe de Brodie* (1970). It was published a few weeks before the entire collection, as a preview in a literary journal.
“The Other Duel” stands out in Borges’ production, as perhaps the most violent and bloody piece that he ever wrote. It is the story of two gaucho soldiers, known to be fierce rivals, who are captured in one of the civil wars of the 19th century and sentenced to death. The execution is carried out as a macabre final competition: after having their throats cut, the two are supposed to race to see who is the bravest. The exceptional thing about this story, in literary critic Beatriz Sarlo’s reading, is that it is void of the characteristic understatement. One can only speculate as to why Borges chose this particular piece for pre-publication, but Sarlo sees it as a direct response, conscious or not, to the recent execution of the former president Aramburu by the hitherto un-known guerrilla group Montoneros.

Pedro Eugenio Aramburo was the general who toppled Juan Perón’s first regime in the military coup of 1955. The abduction and execution, 15 years later, of the then retired Aramburu, was the vengeance of the bombardment of Plaza de Mayo, of the mass executions that followed the coup, of the deportation of Perón and proscription of his movement and, most of all, the absolute and unforgivable crime of stealing and abusing Evita Perón’s corpse, which itself could only be explained as an act of passionate hate and primitive vengeance on behalf of the Anti-Peronists. Beatriz Sarlo brings these three seemingly diverse phenomena together— the killing of Aramburo, the political body of Evita, and the writing of Borges - in a fascinating analysis (La pasión y la excepción, 2003). Why did Borges, at the age of seventy, choose to imagine and record this macabre story of two gaucho soldiers? Her answer is that the enormity of what is narrated in “The Other Duel” is inexplicable, and inaccessible to any reductive reading. There is no answer, but a hypothetical one. And what is interesting is really the question itself - which reminds us that “literature can make known even that which it does not fully know” (Sarlo 2003: 229).

There is of course no reference to Aramburo, or any contemporary reality, in the text. A purely textual analysis might find other clues, but surely not this one. It was certainly not Borges’
deliberate attempt to make an allegory of the conflict that was to devastate Argentina in the coming
decade. This is something that Beatriz Sarlo reads into the text some 30 years after its publication.

At the time of the event, she was among the many who celebrated the extra-legal execution of
Aramburro. Her analysis is an attempt at understanding the sensibility of the turbulent ‘70s of which
she, herself, formed part. In retrospect the match makes perfect sense. This exceptional story by
Borges appears as a key to the modern Argentinean tragedy.

The power of imagination

The above is also an illustration of the perhaps most distinctive feature of literature: its
untimeliness. Unlike news reports, witness testimonies, and other documents, the literary text may
sometimes reveal its ethnographic value only in retrospect. With hindsight, it appears as prophetic,
as forecasting the future/present. Yet, simultaneously, it often requires a long incubation time. The
literary interpretation of historical events and social processes often needs a distance of a
generation, or two. Contrary to the reporter or ethnographer, the literary writer often works the void
of (personal) experience. Although literature has historically played an important role as witness-
bearer, especially when other forms of documentation have been missing, today, when we have
immediate access to almost all dramatic events in the world, there is little incitement for literature to
assume that role. Competing with journalism, in terms of immediate impact or communication
power, is usually not a good idea. In terms of imaginative power, however, literary fantasy is and
remains unsurpassed.

Returning to the specific context of researching social change, I claim to have demonstrated
that the unique value of literature and other fiction as ethnographic data lies precisely in that which
is non-verifiable, either because it has not been documented, or because it cannot be documented.

19 The untimely alludes to that which runs against the grain of the present. Untimeliness is in Chilean literary
scholar Idelber Avelar’s view the very constitutive quality of the literary (Avelar 1999: 20-21).
The literary imagination can give voice to those who are silenced – not only the victims of violations, but also the perpetrators, who seldom, if ever, testify. The perpetrator’s perspective is a common theme in Argentinean literature about the Dictatorship; not so much that of the torturer/murderer but rather the sometimes guilt-ridden conscience of the foot soldier or the petty bureaucrat - who, for example, administered the adoption of the children of the disappeared (Gusmán 1995; Millares 1999; Kohan 2002).

One of the most extreme – and contested – recent examples in this vein is French American author Jonathan Littell’s *Les bienveillantes* (2006, *The Kindly Ones*). It is a fictional autobiography by an SS officer, which in horrific detail depicts the atrocities of World War II, especially on the Eastern European Front, through the mind of a complex, in many ways likeable person, who is involuntarily involved in the war crimes. Littell, of Jewish descent, has explained the motivation behind his arduous research as “imagining what he himself would have done had he been born in pre-war Germany and had become a Nazi”.20

The literary imagination’s constitutive ability to recollect and reconstruct (historical) memory also points in the other direction, towards the future. Counter-factual hypothesis is a method that has occasionally been used by academic researchers, not least economic historians, to construct alternative development scenarios. What if, for example, the industrial revolution had happened in China, not Europe? In literature, the utopian or dystopian projection is a classic genre, and a well established form for social critique. A recent – likewise contested – French example is Michel Houellebecq’s novel *Submission* (2015), set in a near future, 2022, when the presidential election in France is a choice between the Muslim Brotherhood and the National Front. Regardless of the author’s possibly speculative or sensationalist motives, the novel’s indisputable literary

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quality lies in plausibly depicting the protagonist’s gradual adaption to the new political situation. Hence, in a slightly distorted vision, by way of a sort of *verfremmedung* effect in Bertolt Brecht’s sense, the novel reveals some very disturbing tendencies in current French (and European) society.

Historically, dystopian projections clearly outnumber utopian ones, and definitely so in contemporary cultural production. In the light of today’s converging political, economic and environmental crises, this is likely to remain the case. One of the major challenges for communication for development may in fact be to enhance imaginations of futures we want to create and inhabit, locally as well as globally.

The *methodological* challenge when using creative writing, whether as a means of exploration or as a knowledge source, is to bear in mind the distinction between fact and fiction. Even though the borderline may be arbitrary and increasingly blurred, Academia and Art remain sovereign states, governed by their own rules and standards. In order for them to inform each other, and for the distinction to even be unsettled, it is a requirement to be aware of their fundamental separateness.

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