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Laurie Baker

I can only seem to approach these questions I have through the explication of more questions. I am all at once fixated on unknowing and trepidation, and perplexed by my experience of ethnographic representation and its crisis thus far. This is of the utmost necessity really, and I could not imagine approaching serious work, being ethnographic writing, any other way than this intense consideration of the possible repercussions of what is written and by whom. I may start from a perplexed and hyper-cautious stance, however maybe in my crisis I will tell my own story of approaching other stories about the world.

To begin, I wonder what are authentic stories? And, who decides what is authentic and what that may mean? These questions seem to evidently rely on who has the power. The power to write, record, narrate, publish, and describe the stories that engage the writer and the teller of the story has been unequally distributed through time and space. Where is the authenticity in the relationship between story-teller and recorder that is never exempt from the relations of power inherent in all relationships? Or, perhaps this idea of power is too pervasive, and the shifting and dynamic nature of any kind of relationship is more an interplay between power sharing internally, and the forces of power from outside the relationships that affect it. Foucault suggests that power is the ability to create detail, among other features, and to produce detailed knowledge (Said 1989: 244). Thus, story-telling and the relationship between ethnographer and collaborator is imbibed with relations of power when a detailed and in some sense authentic knowledge is produced. This relationship, it is important to note, as Edward Said does, is situated socially, as we are, both at home and away and our representation and re-telling of stories “bear[s] as much on the representer’s world as on who or what is represented” (1989: 229).

Between the ‘imperial’, official representation, presented by those with a vested interest in maintaining specific relationships of power, and the actual people being represented, lies a space where the discrepancy is dominant. The representation becomes a reflection of the writer in addition to the representation of our
ethnographic encounter with the stories we are told.

If the authentic story is only told by the people the story describes what is lost in the translation when we tell the stories of other people? Can we translate, both literally and through developing an understanding of cultural practices, the lives and stories of people from all places? How do we approach the ethnographic engagement without privileging the official ethnographic narrative over the local authentic narrative? Do we have access to the authentic narrative, the story, and the metaphors by which social life is ordered? Chinua Achebe notes that, "we must remember that the extravagant attire which Metaphor wears to catch our eye is merely a ploy to engage our hearts and minds" (2001: 17). In our engagement with metaphor, with the ongoing shifting nature of meaning and symbolism, can we trace the authentic narrative, the meanings that translate a shared sense of the world? Perhaps authenticity is an emotive engagement, like the erotics of art, which denotes the shared sense of being-in-the-world that is not conveyed through the official or 'imperialist' rhetoric.

It is necessary to then ask, how is ethnography situated? Or, how does the ethnographer situate herself between the rhetoric of authenticity and officiality? Do we set ourselves up as the representative, telling stories of others that ultimately engender the struggles for power: political, social or interpersonal that may be born out from the stories told? The stories begin to be entities unto themselves, as metaphors that convey meaning and hold onto the people in the way they are embodied by social actors. The proximity to our stories of being-in-the-world, the embodied dispositions which are told about the life of the exotic 'Other' by anthropologists, and travelers and colonialists before them, served to foster the pervasive attitudes of what being 'Other' was like or about, can we hope that while producing situated, reflexive, collaborative works we are not representing a current understanding that is as negatively situated and historically contingent as many Eurocentric accounts were. I believe that we may have the tools and understanding, even if only partial in our representation to change the way 'imperial' and official discourses

It is important to draw attention to, as Jameson does, the role of stories in our lives. They are transformed and reformulated by the teller and in the re-telling take on a different meaning, translated in the time and place of the telling.

Perhaps we should ask if authenticity is fleeting, if it is located in the moment, and not in the representation of the moment of story-telling. Authenticity or an authentic characterization is, and only can be, a situated representation masquerading as Real. James Clifford suggests that the "predicament of ethnography...[is the]...fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures" (Clifford 2001:599). The rhetorical strategies employed by a story-teller are audience specific, and situated in the same way ethnography may be. A particular audience will always be in mind when we write and the concern then becomes not of authenticity but of our attachment and engagement with the people with whom we work and tell stories. Clifford suggests that

If ethnography is situated between systems of meaning and we are a part of constructing meaning through sharing the stories we hear and are told, then the authentic moment is simply when what we are told resonates in us, moves us to re-tell what we hear (2001:599).

"There is such a thing as absolute power over narrative. Those who secure this privilege for themselves can arrange stories about others pretty much where, and as, they like" (Achebe 2001: 24). And, so it has been in ethnographic representation as many anthropologists have donned the omniscient voice and claimed primacy of personal opinion and judgment as the 'Truth' about others. We have been struggling with these issues and thoughts for multiple disciplinary lifetimes. Further, if the situated and partial stories told about the life of the exotic ‘Other’ by anthropologists, and travelers and colonialists before them, served to foster the pervasive attitudes of what being ‘Other’ was like or about, can we hope that while producing situated, reflexive, collaborative works we are not representing a current understanding that is as negatively situated and historically contingent as many Eurocentric accounts were. I believe that we may have the tools and understanding, even if only partial in our representation to change the way 'imperial' and official discourses
and stories have been deployed by the powers that be and have cauterized the way people have been envisioned. The official stories in this case, in the colonial period and now, are touted as authentic. This is the crux of the argument. When we write about people we become a part of a system of meaning, a part of the dislocation of power between writer and story-teller and our re-telling of stories cannot be authentic in the official sense or else we risk claiming absolute authority over narrative.

I have asked myself many times why I want to be an anthropologist, why I want to write about people. Chinua Achebe, in *Home and Exile*, outlines three reasons for becoming a writer. The third reason resonates with me and he says, "And the third, which you learn in the process of becoming, is that you consider the whole project worth the considerable trouble -- I have sometimes called it terms of imprisonment - - you will have to endure to bring it to fruition" (2001: 39). It is the labour of desire, love, enthusiasm, not meaning of course that it cannot be wrong, but only that the writing will be uniquely situated beyond the 'objective' necessity of earlier ethnographic accounts. Margaret Atwood states the three questions that are often asked of writers: "Who are you writing for? Why do you do it? Where does it come from?" (2002: xix). These questions seem to me to be central to any ethnographic engagement we, as anthropologists, undertake. Science and empirical reliability are pushed out in favour of what people say and how they enact what is said, and reproduce their way of being-in-the-world for future generations and perpetuate meaningful acts to which they give primacy and prominence. There is also room for the anecdotes, jokes, and the performance of stories to be told if we are both at home and in exile when we are separated by the social constitutions of our internal/external selves. We embody both a connection to home and the exclusion from it as we enter as the recorder and ethnographer. As such and engaged as such, Achebe says,

Having claimed and exercised the freedom to tell my own story, I recognize that I must stand ready for the full range of others' responses, be they favourable or unfavourable, well-informed or not. And even learn from them! (2001: 54).

At home or in exile, a marker of belonging such as the passport grants us access to other places but denotes our relationship to home, to the place where we come from. We are never from nowhere even if we move physically through the world. In that vein, the narrative that is shared, and often a marker of belonging, and the stories that are told at home and seemingly in exile in foreign places and from oneself, are personally authentic, even if fleeting rather than official in any sense.

What does it mean to tell one's own stories? And, how do we pacify the stories we tell and do we have to? We are perhaps privileged to have the ability to confront and interact with narratives, stories and discourses, which I have used interchangeably throughout this exploration, of many ways of being in the world. Why cannot the authentic moment simply be that point at which what we are told resonates in us and moves us to re-tell what we hear? The authentic narrative is then emotive and engaged, and mindful of what the repercussions may be in the world and for the people with whom we work. I will leave you with a thought from Margaret Atwood, from her book *Negotiating with the Dead*, where she suggests that, as writers “we steal the shiny bits, and build them into the structures of our own disorderly nests” (2002: xix). It may be that, as anthropologists and ethnographers, this is also not far from the truth.

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