

ANTHROPOLOGY, COMPARATIVE LITERATURE, ETHNIC LITERATURE AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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Summary

This chapter explores the relationship between anthropology (as a discipline and a practice) and literature, in particular, ethnic literature and its relationship to the concept of cultural diversity. First, the history of the discipline of anthropological and ethnographic practice is placed in historical context and then the chapter looks at how certain features of anthropology make their way into literature proper, and eventually come to reside in the creation and interpretation of ethnic literature.

1. Introduction

The relationship between literature (its production and interpretation) and anthropology does not become clear until we consider the notion of ethnic or multicultural literature and the attendant issue of cultural diversity. The rather bland term “literature” and the more colorful subset of the category described as “ethnic” or “multicultural” differ in more ways than the innocent-seeming inclusion of the words “ethnic” or “multicultural”—or, for that matter, more specific descriptors such as Native American, African American, Asian American, African, Asian, Indian, and so on—would suggest. To call something “literature” is to suggest that it is the product of human imagination. To call something “ethnic literature” is to imply that it originates from a particular cultural vantage point or performs work that could be described as cultural. When seen this way the imagination can become antiquated postscript and the culture superscript; the way opera librettos scroll behind the performers in the audience’s language with the musical performance coming between the audience and the message. Be that as it may, both the study and the production of literature, in particular ethnic or multicultural literature necessarily involves some aspects of anthropology. Anthropology, as a

discipline, has long cast its eye toward the realm of literature and now the reverse seems to be true as well. Speaking of his anthropological aspirations, Bronislaw Malinowski claimed (not without some nationalistic overtones) that “Rivers is the Rider Haggard of anthropology; I shall be the Conrad.”, whereas, on the other hand, some writers of ethnic literature make claims for the culturality of their productions. Speaking of a speech she as in the process of giving, the Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko cautioned her audience (with none-too-subtle cultural undertones) by saying that for “those of you accustomed to being taken from point A to point B to point C, this presentation may be somewhat difficult to follow. Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider’s web—with many little threads radiating out from the center, crisscrossing one another. As with the web, the structure emerges as it is made, and you must simply listen and trust, as the Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made.” Obviously there is quite a bit of cross traffic between anthropology and literature, even more so when we consider that both anthropology and literature deal in the fluctuating currency of signs. The important questions to ask are: what kind of anthropological approaches inform literary production and interpretation? When did they begin? What purpose do they serve? And what effect do they have?

2. Anthropology as the Study of Man

The discipline of anthropology is by definition the study of “man.” In recent years what exactly “study” means and what “man” means have been hotly debated and theorized and the discipline has grown to include the study of linguistics, semiotics, hermeneutics, discourse theory, literary theory, as well as many long looks at the politics and shape of practice. However, in its early years, not without a fair amount of debate as well, anthropology saw itself as a social science dedicated to the systematic and scientific study of human experience. In the nineteenth century, and still today in some professional programs, anthropology divided itself into four fields—biological anthropology, physical anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and cultural anthropology. Each field took as its ground a different aspect of human existence and parsed it with tools it developed in the process. In the case of cultural anthropology, which is the field most closely related to literature, the discipline’s signature (which set it apart from other social sciences and humanistic modes of inquiry such as history and sociology) was that of fieldwork. Fieldwork, pioneered by Franz Boaz, Bronislaw Malinowski, and W.H.R. Rivers among others, situated the anthropologist within the tribe or group under observation where they were supposed to share in daily life, make extended observations, and affect a more complete study of the group than if they did so under the always cloudy skies of the archives. The idea was that the ethnographer would develop an inner sense or intuition for the culture he was studying that, when treated with a rigorous chemical wash of “hard” science, would yield a durable, supple and functional leather from which to craft a story of man’s makings.

Different ethnographers working in different parts of the world focused on different aspects of culture (and when back home debated which ones were the most compelling) in order to tell different stories. Some early ethnographers (as well as armchair anthropologists and sociologists) thought kinship was the appropriate object of study. Others were intrigued by tribal economic organization. Others still held the belief that religion and ceremony contained the most complete chains of cultural amino acids,

while some thought myth and story, constituent in almost all aspects of cultural life, provided the best material. And many anthropologists and founders of anthropology held vastly different opinions about the relationship between their objects of study and “civilization,” itself a tricky concept. Some, like amateur anthropologists Lewis Henry Morgan, John Wesley Powell, and the sociologists Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, saw primitive (read tribal/not-white) societies as precursors to technologically advanced, socially complex western societies—useful to study in order to see where the west was born millennia earlier; a kind of living fossil record. While pondering the uniquely human tendency to classify things (events, objects, experience, feelings) Durkheim and Mauss focused on primitive classification because if “we descend to the least evolved societies known . . . we shall find an even more general mental confusion . . . Far, then, from man classifying spontaneously and by a sort of natural necessity, humanity in the beginning lacks the most indispensable conditions for the classificatory function.” For them and anthropologists like them, tribal cultures were the precursors for western civilization. Difference was largely cast a matter of rudimentary versus refined. Franz Boaz and others partially rejected the evolutionist model and saw tribal or primitive cultures as discrete reactions to somewhat universal phenomena that had entirely appropriate and intelligible reactions to life—by studying the relatively bounded tribal group (as opposed to the seemingly unbounded and fluid west) one could see the specific cultural response and the universal human stress. “One fact derived from these [ethnographic] studies,” wrote Boaz, “is the *relative* correctness of emotions which seem so natural to us. It is difficult for us to conceive that the feeling the father bears toward his child should be altogether different among primitive peoples from what it is among ourselves . . . To draw conclusions about the development of mankind as a whole we must try to divest ourselves of these influences, and this is only possible by immersing ourselves in the spirit of primitive peoples whose perspectives and development have almost nothing in common with our own . . . Only in this way can our intellect, instructed and formed under the influences of our culture, attain a correct judgment of this same culture.”

What is important to carry forward from the birth of anthropology is the idea that tribal or non-western cultures are early, sometimes imperfect, relatives to western culture and that the links as well as the differences can be seen by the trained participant observer. The idea of being *within*, that is important to carry forward into our understanding of the relationship between anthropology and literature, because *insider-ness* and, conversely, *outsider-ness*, come up again and again as the various products of anthropology and literature are in turn classified and categorized.

3. Myth and Folklore—The Writing of Culture and Cultural Writing

One of the most, established, respected, and important ways in which researchers have to subpoena the evidence of culture and cultural difference is in the collection, interpretation, and dissemination of story. Alternately cast as folklore, myth, legend, and the like, stories—from incidental autobiographical tales to centrally held foundational legends such as creation myths—are widely held as the one of the most important repositories for the blueprint of culture. Beginning in the nineteenth century with ethnographers and folklorists such as Edward Sapir and Franz Boaz and continuing on in the early years of the twentieth century in the work of Paul Radin, Benjamin Whorf,

and, Claude Levi-Strauss, the analysis of narrative (and not necessarily with the advantage of fieldwork) began in some ways to replace kinship, economics, religion, and social structure as the best way to read the cultural blueprint. With the rise of semiotics and the work of Barthes, Bakhtin, and, later, Geertz, the idea that stories could be read as culture and that culture could be read as stories gained dominance. One of the earliest and most popular instances of recorded story was Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's transcription, translation, and description of the "Chant to the Fire-fly" published in 1845. More folklore than myth, the short Ojibwe children's song was taken up and used (along with more substantial myths and stories) to form the basis for Longfellow's American epic, *The Song of Hiawatha*. The "Chant to the Fire-fly" was taken (lightly) as a moment cultural expression and soon other Native American myths like trickster tales, creation stories, and the like, were treated as authorless expressions of culture and cultural difference. When Boas was working in the early part of the twentieth century two of his graduate students, Ella Deloria and Zora Neale Hurston produced ethnographic data that was largely comprised of story and both went on to publish novels of their own—successfully hybridizing their work as ethnographers, "native" informants, and prose stylists. Both Deloria and Hurston's work was read less as individual creations or inventions as expressions of culture performed on the page for largely non-native, non-black audiences.

Alongside these developments, which occurred largely within the confines of the anthropological discipline, a similar kind of approach to narrative was being acted out (but less often commented on) in the sphere of literature itself. In the works of Proust, Joyce, and Mann, the issues of style and structure (not to mention duration) rose to the level of equal and even greater importance than character, plot, and story. The idea was that a literary creation should, largely through style and structure, create in the reader the same sensations that the book sought to describe. There was a new premium placed on the attempt to reach a Longinian sublime through language. As Paul Fussell points out brilliantly in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, as a result of World War I irony and despair rose to occupy strangely literary places and one sometimes feels that it is impossible to find a book that does not contain irony after the armistice. This response to the calamities of modernity and the desire to recreate the same despair and alienation in the reader that occurs in text reached its height in the poetry of T.S. Eliot. *The Wasteland*, *Prufrock*, and *Four Quartets* successfully challenge the old romantic myths by which one used to constitute experience and recreated the fracture and disintegration of those myths and the lives they speak to. By the time Gertrude Stein addressed the same issues, the idea that writing could *perform* modernity (itself a term that embraced western culture, its dissolution, and the hope for progress) as later ethnic writing is expected to perform culture, was perfectly in place. Disjointedness was not just a subject, it was an experience. She plays this out in her poem "If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso" where she writes that "Exact resemblance to exact resemblance the exact resemblance as exact as a resemblance, exactly as resembling, exactly resembling, exactly / in resemblance exactly a resemblance, exactly and resemblance. For this is so . . ."

4. Culture and Counter-Culture

Throughout the mid-twentieth century, as first world powers such as England, France,

Spain, Portugal, and Italy were divorced (sometimes amicably but most often not) from their colonies, and as America experienced a number of internal revolutions regarding race—most notably the rise of the Civil Rights movement but also the Women’s movement—the idea of the mainstream and the minority gained literary as well as political importance. Exclusion from the social and political body was also experienced, and vocalized, in the world of literature. Some movements, such as the Harlem Renaissance, sought to discover and create a black aesthetic linked to but different from dominant literary modes that encompassed the cultural and historical experience of African Americans. While other cultures most notably that of Native Americans were held up as antidotes for, as different from, the “western” and “modern” mayhem, the Marxian superstructure of white hegemony. Prelapsidary in aspect, tribal cultures (and the literatures that could contain them) were seen as relatively blissful alternatives to the mean business of modernity. A part of all of these movements was the desire for the right to speak for one’s culture and experience as a way of speaking for oneself. The question was not, as Spivak asks, “can the subaltern speak” but rather, would anyone listen when they did. The work of anthropologists, ethnographers, and sociologists—largely written by writers who did not belong to the group or culture under scrutiny—were seen as increasingly suspect and even manipulative. Anthropology, in some ways, grew out of colonialist enterprises and was as suspect as those enterprises to those who had for so long been described and not really allowed to do the describing. Vine Deloria, Jr. famously linked the issue of alcohol abuse to the work of anthropologists, suggesting that anthropologists, by defining a problem, largely created it. Meanwhile, within the discipline of anthropology itself—ethnography itself, as a mode of inquiry was becoming more and more carefully theorized and while Geertz cast cultures as something that could be read, other anthropologists and theorists of anthropology realized that “doing anthropology” was, in actuality, “doing writing.” Text became the theater in which cultural work from both sides was being performed.

Not only that, but the standards by which literary accomplishment were measured seemed to be skewed away from the supposed “different” kind of narratives that non-western writers might produce. The canon was, as many wryly put it, as destructive as the cannons that used to guard the state. This sentiment was not entirely out of place. Even as late as 1986 Saul Bellow famously asked “Where is the Zulu Tolstoy? Where is the Proust of Papua New Guinea?”

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Biographical Sketch

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