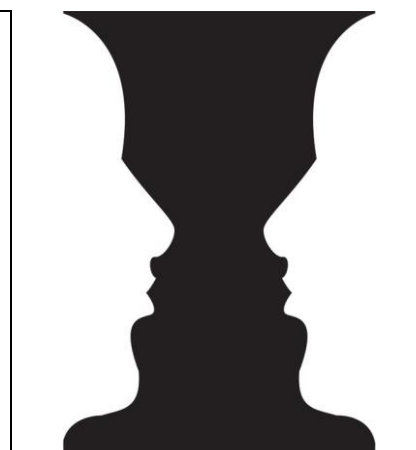


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## **‘Based on a true story’: Ethnography’s impact as a narrative form**

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### *Introduction*

Call for papers, March 2014

“To what extent is a sense of beauty stimulated through rich description and capturing the imagination? Insights are lost through an author's inability to captivate their audience. Movements gain momentum through leaders' ability to inspire action. Religions gain power through orators' depiction of glorious enlightenment. The sensuous frisson that accompanies a good tale has a resonant and mobilizing force.

Working with creativity as a strategic response to "dealing with the unknown, the uncertain in our lives" (Borofsky 2001:69) allows for everyday creativity but also for significant moments. "Yet there is a sense in which artistic creation, rooted as it may be in the negotiated and partial practices of "flow" in everyday life, also achieves itself by standing out from that background of fluid improvisation of forms and becoming a foreground that crystallises into a new shape" (Strathern and Stewart 2009:xii).

Stories provide shape to the flow of life and ethnography is perfectly situated to throw forms of many kinds. We are interested in what happens when the story takes hold and emerges as an independent crystallization of ethnographic experience. What happens when anthropologists engage in rich description of character and context? Who are the audiences of such an account?

We invite contributions that explore the capacity of storytelling to convey anthropological insights. We hope for ethnographically rich descriptions, stories inspired by ethnographic research or playful interventions. All submissions should seek to engage and captivate the audience.”

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The development of our ideas around storytelling gathered pace at the Association of Social Anthropologists annual conference in Edinburgh in 2014 when we co-convened a panel encouraging people to play with ethnographic narrative. Symons was considering the production of fiction as ethnographic output and Maggio was pondering how traditions of storytelling could clarify the literary obfuscation of contemporary anthropological texts. Thanks to the enthusiastic and imaginative response of people at the seminar, we were inspired to further develop this approach to the anthropology of storytelling.

This version of the anthropology of storytelling situates ethnography alongside other narrative forms that give shape to accounts of lived experiences, both real and imagined. The focus for this collection lies in situating ethnographic narrative as a rhetorical device, stylistically different but materially similar to biographies, fiction, poetry, plays, songs and other experiential accounts. We propose that putting ethnography on the same continuum as these narrative forms encourages stylistic sharing, with ethnography drawing from and informed by them.

Stories in this context are processes through which society (open-ended, ongoing activity) becomes culture (activity contextualised to specific circumstances). The stories are meaningful selections - deliberate or subconscious choices by people who construct and share their worldviews by connecting certain elements in specific ways. As accounts of experiences or 'journeys' (Jackson 2002) both real and imagined, these stories are repeated and represented in different styles and formats, contextualised to their cultural milieu.

When Taussig asks "is it not the ultimate betrayal to render stories as 'information' and not as stories?" he warns against over-focusing on stories as data producing mechanisms. In a story's transformation into ethnographic data and the storyteller into informant, "the philosophical character of the knowing is changed. The reach and imagination in the story is lost" (Taussig 2011:145). Taussig's lyrical writing style and method of engaging the reader through powerful visual images is itself a rhetorical device.

Just as Taussig emphasises the different types of ethnographic material as it is captured, the interpretations drawn from fieldwork experiences and re-presented for anthropological analysis contain stylistic decisions. It helps to understand them as different kinds of stories, like those captured in the field, which take the reader on a journey of understanding - "the intelligibility of any story or journey will depend on this unconscious bodily rhythm of going out from some place of certainty or familiarity into a space of contingency and strangeness, then returning to take stock" (Jackson 2002:33). In this collection, the authors explore different narrative styles to shape their insights into stories and play with the notion of storytelling itself.

In contemporary anthropological texts, ethnographies seek to capture the nuances of the anthropologists' experience, weaving together the strands of ideas, histories, assumptions and insights shared through stories in the field together with theoretical insight and existing narrative frameworks. However some works render these insights incomprehensible through the use of technically complex and discipline-specific

stylistic strategies. These obscure texts are often poetic and beautifully constructed analyses. However, attention to their text as a form of storytelling would help make the work and therefore the discipline more accessible and therefore more engaging (Eriksen 2006).

This is not an argument for the ‘dumbing down’ of ethnographic analyses, nor the production of stories without analytical frames. Instead we aim to situate ethnography as storytelling and therefore subject to the storyteller’s commitment to engaging the audience. A self-conscious positioning of ethnography as a narrative form puts it in conversation with other forms of social expression. This argument is a natural successor to Clifford and Marcus’s *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Their tome shook anthropological circles almost thirty years ago by pushing anthropologists to recognise themselves in accounts from the field and pay attention to how these experiential accounts were received and what they represented both intentionally and otherwise. It follows that ethnographic texts can be situated alongside other forms of narrative material and measured, evaluated even as another form of storytelling. Furthermore when an anthropologist pays attention to storytelling’s potential as they write their ethnographic material, what might happen to the text?

Just as anthropological ethnographic practice can inform and educate non-anthropologists in using ethnography as a methodological practice, so anthropologists can draw in and develop different kinds of narrative styles as part of their ethnographic output. Fiction, biography, literary non-fiction, poetry, prose, jokes, metaphors, parables, adverts, painting, sculpture, dance, song and so on, are established mechanisms for storytelling. When anthropologists use ethnography to share insights about people, their lives and the meaning they attach to them, they can draw on such narrative traditions. These forms help make the message more persuasive (Watson 1995). This is absolutely necessary for anthropologists keen on reaching out to audiences beyond the discipline

In the following collection, the authors play with different forms of storytelling as a way of bringing out ethnographic insight.

We begin with a story by Eva van Roekel Cordiviola who uses an imagined narrative to somehow reduce the intensity of a bereavement while also maintaining a sense of its poignancy. She introduces us to Venezuelans living in Buenos Aires, Argentina where feelings are viscerally perceived in the “smell of ripe, almost rotten mangos and wet dogs” and through sexual profanities communicating frustration, jealousy and guilt.

van Roekel Cordiviola’s highly evocative style captivates as we long for Daniel’s death, anticipated initially then left implicit, a narrative structure that functions as a metaphor for the existential condition of the main character; the death of Juan’s friend lies under the surface of everything. In our view, van Roekel Cordiviola seeks to stimulate care for Juan and his world through a story that protects its own content – hinting at what is to come, leading us there and encouraging empathy in Juan’s loss.

Hinting rather than telling is a precautionary measure that Mihirini Sirisena also takes in her epistolary text about love among university students in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

She takes “creative licence” to blend stories collected during fieldwork and represent Hiranthi’s side of the story, thereby declaring the limits of her own representation.

Almost paradoxically, these limits open up a whole new range of possibilities. Showing (rather than telling) people’s meta-thinking establishes connections between them and their socio-cultural world, and spares anthropologists the difficult (perhaps impossible) task of justifying, with convoluted and often fragile arguments, what in fact can be perfectly expressed with the (fictional) voice of the informant. Sirisena provides an *illustration* of a point of view. Ironically, isn’t that all anthropology is meant to be?

The “question of who is speaking is not settled” yet in Amanda Ravetz’s paratactic text about reverie, in which the anthropologist self-consciously ‘braids’ narrative strands. Ravetz is interested in poetics as a method and the potential for reverie and daydreams to guide anthropological understanding. She explores this through an auto-ethnography which moves between imagined scenarios and her own experiences.

The result sounds like a conversation of different voices in which we fill the gaps between each segment of utterance (that of landscape, sky, dream, people, furniture, unlit fire, memories, the content of the fridge, and silence) and bridge them to form a novel and yet fugacious linear narrative. We are confronted with the anthropological insight of connection through “twisted skeins of reverie” - the form and the content are mutually constitutive.

Once anthropologists working with stories acknowledge anthropology as a form of storytelling, we begin to investigate the consequences. As John Harries admits “we fashion our tales and in fashioning our tales constitute different kinds of stories for different kinds of purposes”. Harries describes how he re-formulated a story collected during his fieldwork in Newfoundland, Canada. It was not just the medium of storytelling that influenced it, but also the audience (real or imagined) and the circumstances of the storytelling situation. Under these multiple influences and through several re-laborations of the story over time, though, the voice of the original storyteller “is long gone”. Harries prompts us to reflect seriously about “who is actually speaking”.

On the other hand, David Brooks presents Uluru Inverted as “a story told not by ‘anyone’”. Brooks accounts a story told by his Australian Aboriginal companions about Mr Uluru. This character, the story goes, claimed to be the owner of Uluru, the giant red rock looming high in the centre of Australia. In the story, a white filmmaker turns up one day and screens a movie where such Mr Uluru’s claim is falsified. Brooks argues that “Mr Uluru’s peers subtly brought him down to size, while insulating themselves from the charge of having done anything of the sort by putting the blame on a whitefella”.

Brooks’ interpretation also prompts us to ask the question, who is the story being told to? Taking this angle, the Uluru inverted story could also be highlighting Brooks’s own presence in the community as a whitefella with his own designs on the place. While excessively reflexive thinking can obscure human narratives, non-reflexive interpretations of storytelling situations might underestimate the intersubjective dimension of stories. Brooks helps us think through how stories are used to convey social

rules and his own warning as an anthropologist seeking secrets in the Australian Aboriginal context.

Intersubjectivity of storytelling is the theme of Marilena Papachristophorou's biographical chronicle of her research in the Aegean island of Lipsi, Greece. She demonstrates that, as the anthropologist incorporates the community through the shaping of her experience in the form of storytelling, so does the community incorporate her through the articulation of its own symbols and signs (the "panegyric" pilgrimage, and the honorary citizenship bestowed to her).

From the inside of Juan's guts, to the inner epistolary monologue of a young Sri Lankan woman, to an autoethnography in Britain, slowly the ethnographer distinguishes himself/herself from the character of the story he/she tells. Then he/she becomes conscious that it is possible to tell that story in different ways depending on his/her own different purposes. Then comes the question of which purpose to pursue, and choice of one possible way of telling the story: one that concentrates on the people who tell, another where the ethnographer and story are mutually constitutive, two distinguished ontological processes as consequences of interaction during fieldwork.

In engaging with a specific writing and rhetorical style the ethnographer not only acknowledges his/her ethnography as a meaningful selection among infinite narrative possibilities, but concentrates on the content of the story as expression of culture, that is, of meaningful selection. A storytelling structure captures the reader, promoting a form of engagement that mirrors the ethnographer's engagement with the people he/she writes about.

Stories, indeed, have a unique power to possess the minds and the hearts of people around the world. Choosing a particular style and rhetoric means switching the focus of anthropology from epistemology and reflexivity to beauty and sharing. The pleasure of reading and sharing cultural knowledge has been greatly undermined by the post-modern sceptical attitude towards knowledge production, and the reflexive turn made introverted rumination acceptable as a form of anthropology, and even fashionable. We do not condemn these ways of doing anthropology. With the anthropology of storytelling, we simply want to bring to the fore the storytelling character of ethnographies: a perspective based on the assumption that humans share stories because they like them, and they like them because they find them beautiful.

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**Rodolfo Maggio** holds a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from the University of Manchester. His research interests span from storytelling, to Pentecostal Christianity, to the domestic moral economy of Solomon Islanders. He has conducted fieldwork research on Pentecostal Christianity in Rome, Prague, and Honiara, and from 2010 he has been contributing to the ESRC-funded research project "The Domestic Moral Economy: an Ethnographic Study of Value in The Asia Pacific Region" through ethnographic research in Solomon Islands. Deeply persuaded by the power of stories to change people's lives, Rodolfo continues to work at the intersection between ethnography, anthropology as storytelling, and the anthropology of storytelling.