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Samuel Gerald Collins: Encouraging the Secret Vice in Anthropological Writing

“Is it a Memorial about his own history that he is writing, aunt?”
 “Yes, child,” said my aunt, rubbing her nose again. “He is memorializing the Lord Chancellor, or the Lord Somebody or other—one of those people, at all events, who are paid to *be* memorialized—about his affairs. I suppose it will go in one of these days. He hasn’t been able to draw it up yet, without introducing that mode of expressing himself; but it don’t signify; it keeps him employed.”

In fact, I found out afterwards that Mr. Dick has been for upwards of ten years endeavoring to keep King Charles the First out of the Memorial; but he had been constantly getting into it, and was there now.

—Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

In *David Copperfield*, Dickens introduces the comic figure of “Mr. Dick,” whose efforts to write a contemporary memorial are continuously hampered by his inability to *not* write about the severed head of Charles the First. For me, the challenge of teaching students to write anthropologically bears an eerie similarity to Dickens’s Mr. Dick, fruitlessly trying to keep the severed head out of it. As in any writing, there are lots of “heads” to be kept at bay, including the many-headed hydra of orientalism, racism, androcentrism, together with the usual suspects of specious generalization. In fact, one can see the success of ethnographic writing as in some ways depending on its exclusions, the kinds of choices people make when analyzing their fieldwork between what is important and what is unimportant—in other words, deciding which differences “make a difference” (to paraphrase Gregory Bateson) and cutting out the rest. Or, to put it another way, the work of ethnography is very much premised on what Michel Serres has called “parasite” writing, where anthropologists either

incorporate the parasite into their midst—and thereby accept the new form of communication the parasite inaugurates—or they act together to expel the parasite and transform their own social practices in the course of doing so.” (Brown 16-17)

Going through fieldnotes and generating something meaningful from all the effluvia is just such a struggle.

But there are other things the ethnographer generally seeks to exclude—things J.R.R. Tolkien refers to in a well-known paper delivered at a 1931 Esperanto conference as the “secret vice.” For him, this meant the fascination with the creation

of fictive languages, a hobby that, obviously, worked well for him in the end. But there are perfectly good reasons for keeping avocations like this secret. One can hardly imagine Tolkien giving a job talk on the morphology of Elvish at Oxford: “Forget about the voiced fricative in Old Norse for a minute—look at this cool writing system I developed for Quenya!” In the larger sense, the “secret vice” might refer to any imaginative social or cultural construct entertained by the researcher in addition to her academic work. Not just systematic imaginings (as with Tolkien), but the world of conjectural fantasy in general—the imaginative faculty. And as in Tolkien’s case, there are perfectly good reasons for keeping these thoughts secret. Indeed, even less welcome than the revelation that Malinowski fantasized about his Trobriand informants (as he did in *Diary in a Strict Sense of the Term*) would be that Malinowski was busy in his tent elaborating on fictional cultural mores (he was, though, an aficionado of H. Rider Haggard).

But this was actually the case with Chad Oliver, a prolific writer of anthropological science fiction who was also the Chair of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Texas for almost twenty years. Although never actually clandestine about his sf writing, Oliver was careful to publish his stories as “Chad Oliver” and his anthropology as “Symmes C. Oliver”—that is, until he “came out” at an American Anthropological Association meeting with his paper, “Two Horizons of Man” (1974), when he considered the relationship of some of his best known novels and stories to academic anthropology. In his introduction, he confesses:

When I began teaching anthropology, in 1955, it certainly never occurred to me to discuss science fiction at a meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Indeed, I strongly suspect that if I had done so it would have started me down the trail as a migratory assistant professor. (Oliver 1)

Indeed, Oliver claims that there were several professors who “read science fiction on the sly” (2)—reflecting, perhaps, not only the low esteem in which science fiction is held by intellectual society in general but also the derogatory way in which anthropologists view what Raymond Williams has called “space anthropology.”

But Oliver’s science fiction has a great deal to do with anthropology (including not just a few space-faring anthropologists)—just as Tolkien’s fictional languages had a great deal to do with linguistics and English literature. Both of them eventually came clean with their “vices” to their professional peers, albeit rather long after those careers were ensconced in tenure. Of course, this wasn’t the reason for their confession—both felt that their avocations had something to add to their academic fields.

As Tolkien put it, inventing these “beautiful phonologies” isn’t really going to “light on anything that in nature or in accident has never anywhere before been discovered or contrived” but there are important, salutary effects (208).

The instinct for ‘linguistic invention’—the fitting of notion to oral symbol, and *pleasure in contemplating the new relation established*, is rational, and not perverted. In these invented lan-

guages the pleasure is more keen than it can be even in learning a new language—keen though it is to people in that case—because personal and more fresh, more open to experiment of trial and error. (206)

That is to say, the value here is less in discovering something really new (your fictional language will not be a truly alien language after all) than in allowing a new perspective on extant, human languages. And this “great freshness of perception of the word-form” (206) is rationale enough for pursuing the hobby.

For Oliver, his science fiction worlds also had something to contribute to anthropology. As he explained in a newspaper interview towards the end of his life:

There’s the kind of open-minded perspectives that science fiction has conceivably made me a better anthropologist, and on the other side of the coin, the kind of rigor that anthropology has conceivably made a better science fiction writer. (“Our Past” 16)

That is, formulating fantastic worlds precipitates a kind of “cognitive estrangement” (Suvin) not dissimilar to the ethnographic injunction to “make the familiar strange and the strange familiar” (Comaroff and Comaroff 6), but with the added level of reflexivity: re-casting the anthropological project in alien contexts. These kinds of thought experiments may have value in themselves for an anthropologist trying to analyze the anthropological encounter, but there’s another element to this as well: the ways in which imaginative contexts highlight different relationships, alternatives and connections.

One complaint about academics in general over the past twenty years (granted, there have been more than a few) is a general complacency that accepts the status quo. As Fredric Jameson puts it:

The surrender to the various forms of market ideology—on the *left*, I mean, not to mention everybody else—has been imperceptible but alarmingly universal. Everyone is now willing to mumble, as though it were an inconsequential concession in passing to public opinion and current received wisdom (or shared communicational presuppositions), that no society can function efficiently without the market, and that planning is obviously impossible. (Jameson 263)

This suggests, among other things, a failure of imagination among our colleagues—a willingness to reproduce disciplinary division between cultures, social life and economics and, accordingly, to confine our findings and descriptions of other peoples to evocations of a (largely) gestural resistance to global capitalism—one that reinforces the feeling of monolithic inevitability even as it explores acts of quotidian resistance. That is, it leaves largely unchallenged the varied “audit cultures” that overdetermine the anthropological encounter in the age of network society, the ones that insidiously structure our ideas of meritocracy, of compensation, of social life, and, ultimately, of truth itself (Shore). If our hope is to move

“doxa” to “heterodoxy,” then this presents some real problems.

However, an interesting development in anthropology over the past twenty years has been a new willingness to leap over barriers erected by Western disciplinarity and explore connections between parts of life ordinarily held apart—ethnographic writing that tacks between macro-scale economic phenomena and more everyday life, between big corporate science and reproduction, between epistemology and bodily hexis.

This hasn't been a fanciful effort, though—the research has been based on fieldwork, but with the growing recognition that culture, as Marilyn Strathern writes, “consists in the way analogies are drawn between things, in the way certain thoughts are used to think others” (33). Acknowledging that cultural meanings consist of exactly those imaginative leaps that forge new affinities between phenomena ordinarily thought unconnected is not a manumission of empiricism. Instead, it's an abjuration to imagine.

That is, if the sociological imagination was supposed to be out linking together individual and society, then the anthropological imagination traces (occasionally subterranean) connections between different cultures, socialites, institutions, and epistemologies. It's the unexpected (from the position of the reading audience) that is the great hope of ethnographic writing, the capacity of the work to precipitate cascading shifts of interpretive frames from expected (and tautological) understandings of human life to something else—in other words, to evoke alternatives to the status quo.

To go back to the beginning, this means occasionally letting in the head of Charles the First after all, or, to put it another way, allowing “the secret vice” to suggest new directions for writing. For Tolkien, this involved the new perspective fantastic languages gave him on real philology; for Chad Oliver, sf became a way of highlighting cultural diversity. In “the whole emphasis on looking at things from different perspectives” (“Two Horizons” 6), anthropological experiments with sf remind us “that different solutions to the problems of living have value” (17), and that there are alternative possibilities to the lives we think of as natural and inevitable.

This is not a skill that we teach our students, where we try to coax disciplined writing structured in a tendentious triangle of background, data, and conclusions. But we don't have to go far to see that the more well-known works in contemporary anthropology are exactly those that combine imaginative leaps with careful ethnographic description, a talent that, perhaps, cannot be taught but that still might be stimulated through the controlled revelation of our secret vices.

Serres gives the parable of the restaurant. A poor man momentarily satisfies his hunger with the smells coming out of the back door of a kitchen, but the sous-chef races out of the restaurant and angrily insists that the man pay for the smells he's consumed. Finally, a passer-by makes a useful suggestion: pay for the smell of food with the sound of a few coins struck against the pavement.

The new arrival makes a link between two different forms of social order, one where coins are exchanged for food, and another where sounds are exchanged for smells. No exchange nor communication was thought possible between these two systems. The action of the parasite—the third man of the fable—is to open a channel where a new kind of exchange is possible, where coins are transformed into sounds which are exchanged with food

transformed into smell. Communication becomes possible.
(Brown 16)

The new meanings depend on this random passerby, who provides the synaptic leap between two different systems (olfactory and aural) by the imaginative transposition of metaphor, and in doing so transforms the entire encounter.

But how do we do this in the classroom? Gregory Bateson used to dump a dead crab on the table in his seminars and ask his students “to pretend that we were Martian anthropologists, that is, intelligent beings (whatever *that* means) who have no presuppositions at all about what “life on Earth” might be or look like” (Nachmanovitch 113). Other anthropologists have tried other techniques, but they all boil down to efforts to temper the “discipline” parts of our discipline with exercises to stimulate the imaginative faculty. Still, in this day and age, these are not exercises that can be readily applied at my university. After all, don’t I need IRB approval for a dead crab?

I still struggle with these questions in the classroom. I very much want my students to surprise me with new ideas and new approaches that will both demonstrate their own interpretive imagination while at the same time re-energizing my research. At the same time, much of what I teach only rewards their mimetic faculty: their capacity to follow the dictates of their forbears and tender commentaries that synthesize and elaborate, but never make any novel connections. When someone occasionally does, say, hand in a paper demonstrating the efficacy of anthropological theory for their Wiccan practice, I am effusive in my praise, but disingenuously aware of the double standards I’ve applied; my own essay assignments are, sadly, dutifully tied to the learning objectives for the course and imaginative leaps are an early casualty of the audit cultures in which I am embedded.

Perhaps one way out of this double bind is through research: if anthropology’s “secret vice” turns out not to be so secret after all, and if the imaginative faculty, like Serres’s passer-by, turns out to be key (rather than extraneous) to anthropological work, then the pedagogy of anthropology must change as well. Until then, perhaps, my classroom continues as before, with my own secret vice—my unacknowledged preference for imaginative work—intact.

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Loren Glass: Getting with the Program

"This book is the result of a vision." So opens the introduction to Paul Engle's edited volume, *Midland: Twenty-Five Years of Fiction and Poetry, selected from the Writing Workshops of the State University of Iowa*. Over the course of his introduction, Engle elaborates his vision of "a powerful new direction in this country's culture, the writer everywhere on campus, the older as teacher, the younger as student" (xxii). For Engle, the creative writing program could become a home for writers in a country that had no viable culture capital to which they could migrate. Instead of London coffee houses or Parisian cafés, young American writers would have the Writers' Workshop, which would offer them "hard criticism and decent sympathy" from their peers in an institutionally subsidized community "freed from the imperatives of the market place" (xxvi). Engle concludes his introduction with a prediction that "by the end of the twentieth century the American university will have proved a more understanding and helpful aid to literature than ever the old families of Europe" (xxx).

Few prophecies have been realized as completely as Engle's. In 1961, the year *Midland* was published, there were only a handful of creative writing programs in the United States, and Engle's vision would have seemed not only unlikely but also undesirable for many if not most American writers, working as they were in the long shadows of Hemingway and Faulkner, whose insistence on autonomous apprenticeship and resistance to institutional discipline seemed to constitute the very possibility of their literary art. Nevertheless, creative writing programs expanded rapidly enough that by 1967 long-time Workshop faculty member R. V. Cassill would see the need to found the Associated Writing Programs (now the Association of Writers and Writing Programs with 439 member programs). By 1975, there were fifteen creative writing programs granting MFA's (of which nine were founded by Iowa graduates) and 32 granting MAs (of which sixteen were founded by Iowa graduates). In 2009, there were a total of 822 creative writing programs in the United States, 153 of which grant MFAs, and 37 of which grant the increasingly