Commentary: Converting Silences into Possibilities

Applying Lessons from Literary Studies to Ethnographic Knowledge Production

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1. Introduction

Departing from Scott's (1991) famous argument about the understanding of experience as discourse, Benedikt Wolf's essay *"Where † wrote." Utopian Literary Experience in Constantine P. Cavafy's "The Afternoon Sun"* (2024) shows how literature can be understood as a tool that transcends discourse – precisely because it has the ability to free both the reader's and the author's imaginations from conventional understandings of subject positions and sanctioned depictions of reality. Wolf argues that:

> the objects scholars of literature encounter are different from historians' objects in so far as they produce a different kind of experience. While experience in Scott's sense is constituted in an interplay of material conditions, practices and discourse, the experience literary texts produce is a specific kind of experience. It is qualitatively different from other kinds of experience. It is unique in that the experience that the text transcends the conditions under which the text is produced. (Ibid.: 215)

Wolf exemplifies this by drawing attention to literature's ability to construct subject positions in places where the text remains silent: in its gaps of meaning. He claims that "literary experience is not only contingent upon discourse, it is also contingent upon the limits of discourse" (ibid.: 216). In his analysis of Constantine P. Cavafy's poem *The Afternoon Sun*, Wolf shows how the deliberate omission of clear definitions or denominations by the writer can push the reader to formulate new questions about a topic or to seek answers to questions that could not be answered satisfactorily before. He demonstrates this by analyzing Cavafy's use of personal pronouns and articles in Greek to create omissions rather than ambiguities. Cavafy is able to

use this literary tool to create new possibilities of interpretation of gendered forms of being.

The example shows how literature can systematically produce a form of experience that relies on what is not said. This kind of experience is both negative and utopian, in that it opens up imaginaries for different experiences than the ones that are socially sanctioned as desirable, normal, translatable, or understandable.

In what follows, I wish to take Wolf's insights from literary studies as a starting point for showing how these principles of understanding experience could be fruitfully applied to the generation of new epistemologies in ethnographic writing. To develop my argument, I will first say something about ethnography as a literary genre and then briefly describe two ways in which we could use Wolf's ideas when portraying the unspeakable of research participants' worlds of experience, of the bodily experience of researchers, and the translation of this into tacit knowledge for the reader.

2. Can Ethnography be a Literary Genre?

In the 1990s and early 2000s, a number of texts were produced discussing the "crisis of ethnographic representation" (Berg/Fuchs 2016) in which authors dissected ethnography as a literary genre (Clifford et al. 2009). The discussion centered on the status of ethnographic texts and how far they represented reality or some version of the authors' or research participants' experiences.

Up to the 1980s, ethnographic writing was mostly viewed as an effort to describe cultures as accurately as possible in order to preserve them, memorize them, and to make them knowable to those not familiar with them. Here, ethnographic writing was akin to recording, transcribing, photographing, or filming. However, since modern technologies can perform such tasks far better than human writers, the central knowledge-generating task of ethnographic writing has now shifted. Today, there is a general consensus that ethnographic writing is mostly about solving problems of verbalization, i.e., putting into words that which is not language (Hirschauer 2006). In this sense, ethnographic writing has a strong literary dimension to it, because such writing requires a particular narrative style. Notwithstanding, there is also a consensus in the academic community that rather than being literature *per se*, ethnographic descriptions are better described as a complex cultural technique in sociology and anthropology which aims to verbalize the social (Maanen 1988; Wulff 2016; Hirschauer 2006).

Despite the emergence of stimulating new ways of thinking and writing ethnography in recent years, several authors have criticized the limited impact that innovative and often experimental approaches and styles of writing have had on mainstream ethnographic writing to date (Wiles 2020; Fassin 2014). In fact, the writing

style of many contemporary ethnographies does not substantially differ from that discussed and critiqued by Maanen (1988) almost forty years ago. Even more surprisingly, there is still little or no general discussion within the discipline of how to write and how to evaluate the quality of ethnographic texts (Wiles 2020). It is in this sense that I find Wolf's text stimulating, as it opens up a discussion of what we can learn from experience in literary studies for writing about experience in ethnographic texts.

3. The Writing Process as a Tool to Make Visible what Cannot (yet) be Said

Wolfs' discussion of Cavafy's poem draws attention to the fact that writing is best seen as a creative process that has the power to create new and specific experiences in the readers of literary texts. I would argue that it could equally serve as a methodological tool for social scientists who are producing ethnographic texts. In other words, I suggest that ethnographers could engage in a creative process of writing by deliberately producing lacunae in texts when they are yet unable to name objects, processes, or feelings. This process may actually point the writer to the places where new framings or perspectives are required or more thinking needs to be done. This way of writing may actually assist in the production of knowledge that goes beyond readily available frames of meaning.

I assume that this could be particularly relevant in ethnographic research, which often relies heavily on observation and the bodily experience of the unfamiliar. This is because ethnographic researchers frequently find that they stand alone with these experiences, at a loss for words, and only equipped with the means of everyday language. While they do interact with other people, including research participants, as well as organizations, they cannot usually fall back on ready-made datasets, such as interviews or statistics – as most of their knowledge is based on observation, casual talk, and activities undertaken together. Nor can they talk to like-minded equals, as they are often in the position of a stranger among like-minded others. When they start writing down what they have seen, they usually rely only on themselves, their experiences, and their recollections of these experiences. At the same time, and unlike writers of fiction, ethnographers depend on others for everything they write (Wiles 2020). Kristin Ghodese rightly points out that: "Where novelists imagine, ethnographers must observe". (2016: 38) Often, doing activities together in the fieldwork situation creates tacit knowledge of things that are there, but are not put into words (Polanyi 2009). They are felt, but rarely expressed verbally, neither by research participants nor by the ethnographers themselves.

Hence, for the ethnographer, observation is connected to sensation and memory. In this sense, the process of writing ethnography is a tool for scholars to remem-

ber and recognize bodily sensations and feelings that are experienced both subjectively and intersubjectively in the field and elsewhere. Through the writing process, conceptualizations emerge and knowledge can start flourishing. The writing process then becomes a methodological tool that serves to convert fieldwork experiences into data during the process of writing (Hirschauer 2006).

As Wolf shows in his discussion of Cavafy's poem, this conversion of actual experience and our memories of it into theoretical concepts can be achieved by using literary writing techniques such as the creation of an atmosphere of possibility, or of uncertainty, that invites the writer to remember feelings, experiences, and sensations which are yet to be put into words. Just as this may impact the readers of literary texts, it can equally push social scientists to formulate new research questions or reframe old ones. As sociologists and anthropologists, we may want to learn from literary studies here, by focusing in our writing less on the most accurate descriptions of what has been said and done in the field, and instead starting to document silence, the unspeakable, the pre-linguistic, and the indescribable aspects of daily life we encounter routinely during fieldwork (Hirschauer 2006).

When integrating these aspects of our own embodied and intersubjective fieldwork experiences into our writing process through the use of literary tools that symbolize gaps of meaning, we can attempt – as Wolf suggests – to reframe our research experience as something that is not contingent upon the conditions in which it was produced. In Wolf's understanding, gaps of meaning open up the utopian possibility of creating new experiences in the reader's mind. In contrast to Wolf's understanding, however, I argue here that we can also use gaps of meaning in ethnographic writing to make the ethnographer-author remember field experiences in a new light and to feel lived experiences all over again – but from a different semantic perspective.

When we use ethnographic descriptions in this way, we create potential for theoretical innovations, because "language then becomes the central instrument for data production, and concept formation becomes the center of empiricism, since from the very beginning, it is in line with the whole struggle for verbalization with which description is dealing" (Hirschauer: 439).

It is true that Wolf does not suggest that "not saying something" is the same as "not being able to say something yet". The crucial point in his interpretation of Cavafy's poem lies in his utopian ideal, which resists the filling of gaps of meaning out of principle. It is here that ethnographic writing may never be able to do justice to the literary genre or reproduce its particular advantage in the quest for knowledge, because in contrast to literature, ethnography's crucial task remains to verbalize the social. Hence, for ethnographers, writing by using omissions and gaps may actually only work successfully in knowledge production if it advances some form of thinking about what has been actually experienced in the field but cannot (yet) be said.

4. Decolonializing Knowledge

Wolf's text shows how Cavafy creates gaps of meaning in his poem to avoid confirming and reproducing discourse that explains the world of gender relations and situates the reader in it. Through the omission of personal pronouns and articles, he deliberately disrupts gendered discourse to make visible to the reader where conventional gender structure is unable to explain the world around us. Instead, the gaps of meaning open up possibilities for the reader to interpret the situation in completely new and unexpected ways.

I would argue that this writing strategy could also be used as a way of decolonizing knowledge production on gender relations – an endeavor that ethnographers in cultural and social studies have a special responsibility for, given the history of the discipline (Gutiérrez Rodriguez et al. 2016). Writing strategies that refrain from definition make it harder for the reader's mind to build on available discursive patterns to explain the unknown, unseen, or unheard of, instead triggering searches for new verbalizations and imaginations that are created through the writing process. This, however, takes time.

By refusing to frame phenomena with the vocabulary available to us, by deliberately making definitions ambiguous, or by resisting the urge to define altogether, we are simultaneously accepting that we as ethnographic authors do not possess authority over the naming and reframing of social observations. We need to listen to those we do research with in order to give them room to make their voices and languages heard. It may well be that research participants are equally unable to verbalize their tacit knowledge yet and need simply to be listened to carefully in order to find adequate ways to experiment with forms of expression that can carry their message across to those they want to hear. This attentiveness to the times and rhythms in intersubjective knowledge production is important, because – as Knorr-Cetina and Harre (1981), Spivak (1988), and others have pointed out so convincingly – the problem in knowledge production processes is mostly due to not letting others speak rather than to misunderstanding what they have to say. By accepting the ambiguous or unspeakable in our preliminary attempts to define the yet-to-be-named in writing, we recognize that the process of naming and verbalizing in ethnographic research is always a struggle for recognition, for mutual understanding and the negotiating of power imbalances between researcher and researched.

Using gaps of meaning to describe what is not said could make us more aware of the experiences we can share and those for which we have no words (yet). It may also well be that the strategy of deliberately creating gaps of meaning in writing is a privilege not everyone is entitled or able to do – just as naming and framing is a privilege not open to everyone. While recognizing these difficulties in ethnographic writing, creating gaps of meaning could well be a strategy that recognizes the inequalities and power differentials that structure our world. Ethnographic writing, then, could

become sensitive to how, when, and by whom experiences can be expressed, remembered, and reproduced – particularly those for which we have no words because they imply a form of social suffering that is felt by others – but not ourselves.

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