

Writing Worlds: The Art of Seeing in Anthropology, Fiction, and Autobiography

According to the cultural philosopher Yogi Berra, a person can “observe a lot by watching.” If this is so, what do we see when we observe? Can we see who or what is really there? Or, do we only see through the constraints of our own particular life context—our own national, racial, age, gender identities at that particular historical moment? Can our “self” see an “other”? Or do we, in a sense, always invent what we see instead of representing what is there?

Today, the answers to these questions are the subject of much controversy. The issue of whether an observer can see what objectively is there or whether the subjective and objective are inevitably fused has innumerable implications. For example, can an employer view an employee other than through the employer’s self-image? The same question applies to many relationships: parent and child, teacher and student, therapist and client, to list only a few.

These questions haunt and invigorate the contemporary discussion of the politics of cultural differences and writing forms. When an anthropologist travels to another culture for observation and study, what happens? When a fiction writer reflects upon a culture or a subculture within her own world, what happens? Is each actually able to see what is there? Or is each constrained by the dominant cultural assumptions from which he comes? Is the anthropologist’s desire to leave his given home a reflection simultaneously of a desire to recover some sense of his original lost home? Is a novelist’s invention of a fictional world the reflection of a similar drive? Are anthropologists and novelists always writing about what they want or do not want to live—the lost objects of desire or the phobias that threaten to disable them? What moral principles should govern an anthropologist or fiction writer studying a different, less technologically sophisticated and/or less powerful culture? Are such cultures simply available for anthropologists and novelists to alter at will in their ethnographies (the description and recording of cultures) or fiction, respectively? Can they do otherwise? Likewise, when an autobiographer reflects on her own life, can she claim objectivity? Are all three of these kinds of observers writing worlds, generating texts about their own subjective experience? Are the boundaries between these different forms of writing clear? Anthropologists, novelists, and autobiographers all seem to be observers who become participants in what they observe. Each also uses literary metaphors and symbolic forms in the worlds they configure; many novelists and autobiographers seem to use the fieldwork method of anthropologists by recording copious notes on the settings and content of the worlds they create.

In a masterpiece of our century on anthropology and human thought, *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Levi-Strauss searches for basic principles about human society in the

tribes that he encounters in the Amazon. In one of the essays, though, he wonders if he does find basic principles or simply sees the tribes he encounters in relation to the world from which he comes and feels alienated from: "Since we are permanently unable to escape from the norms by which we have been conditioned, our attempts to put different societies, including our own, into perspective, are said to be no more than a shamefaced way of admitting its superiority over all the others." He continues by commenting on what we now refer to as an ethnocentric view of the world and other cultures: "It has sometimes been said that European [or Western] society is the only one which has produced anthropologists, and that therein lies its greatness... Actually, one could claim exactly the opposite: Western Europe may have produced anthropologists precisely because it was prey to strong feelings of remorse, which forced it to compare its image with those of different societies in the hope that they would show the same defects or would help to explain how its own defects had developed within it."

The readings for our exploration of these intriguing questions are varied and rich. Kenneth Good's *Into the Heart: One Man's Pursuit of Love and Knowledge Among the Yanomama* dramatizes the conflict at the heart of contemporary anthropology, for he challenges the classical pattern by becoming a participant within the culture he is supposed to observe in a detached manner. Mario Vargas Llosa, the acclaimed contemporary Peruvian novelist, creates a fictional character with some autobiographical parallels and then has him journey, like Good, into the cultural world of an Amazonian tribe. One of the greatest fiction writers of the twentieth century, Flannery O'Connor, creates in the unforgettable short stories of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* the folklore, texture, and soul of the South as few writers in any form ever have. In the both comic and tragic short stories of *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain*, Robert Olen Butler complicates our theme by generating not only the culture of Louisiana, but also the Vietnamese refugee's perspective of it as well as the world left behind in Southeast Asia. In our final reading, *An American Childhood*, Annie Dillard evokes the world of Pittsburgh in the 1950s as memorably as any writer perhaps ever has.

***Into the Heart: One Man's Pursuit of Love and Knowledge Among the Yanomama*
by Kenneth Good**

In a book that has been called the most vivid account of a rain forest people by a Westerner, Good travels deep into the heart of the Amazon to study the Yanomama, one of the last Stone Age tribes on earth. He goes to do fieldwork observation to document the theory of his dissertation director. After the scheduled period of twelve to fifteen months of observation, however, he does not leave and ends up staying for twelve years. He begins to realize that the theory that he came to find evidence to support is, from his point of view, inaccurate. In his twelve years with the Yanomama, he finds deeper truths about them and about himself. Good seems to be accepted into the tribe, in a sense, and is perhaps able to understand these people by "going native" and thus questioning the traditional ethics of anthropology. The book also becomes an account of his own life as he

develops a relationship with a young Yanomama woman. His original attempt to document a detached description of the “other,” this Amazonian tribe, becomes the story of his own self-construction. Throughout his book, Good also shows awareness of plot structure, setting, characterization, and metaphorical language—techniques that are supposedly the domain of narrative and fiction. Whether or not Good has told the truth about the Yanomama or only what he can see remains a question for each reader to reflect upon.

The Storyteller

by Mario Vargas Llosa

Vargas Llosa has achieved fame as a controversial political candidate in modern Peru as well as an internationally acclaimed novelist. *The Storyteller* provides the perfect companion piece for Kenneth Good’s book. The novel focuses on Saul Zuratas, a marginal individual in Lima’s intellectual society because of his Jewish background and the birthmark that covers half of his face. Feeling rejected, he abandons the life he has known to journey to the Amazon Basin in Peru, where he has perhaps become a member of the Machiguenga, a tribe almost completely isolated from civilization. The implication that Saul finds connections with his Jewish identity in the continual movement of the Machiguenga echoes a pattern at the heart of our series theme: the individual’s tendency to find in a new culture that which he longs for his own. In addition, Saul raises ethical questions at the heart of anthropological writing today: does contact with an outside observer hasten the demise of the culture that the anthropologist observes and tries to render; is Saul able to understand the essence of the Machiguenga by “going native” as Good does with the Yanomama? Additional ambiguities abound, for Saul’s story is told to us by a reflective narrator, a Peruvian who lives in Europe as Vargas Llosa does. The memories he has of life as a graduate student and of study at a linguistics institute in the Amazon also parallel the novelist’s life. The fact that Vargas Llosa uses an actual Peruvian indigenous people in the Machiguenga perhaps associates literature with anthropology. As a novelist or storyteller, is he also wondering if the fiction writer who weaves together myth and history best represents the essence of reality?

Everything That Rises Must Converge

by Flannery O’Connor

In this cycle of interconnected short stories, O’Connor, a Southerner herself, renders her region as much more than a geographical entity. Through symbolic representation and characterization she constructs the rising conflict between characters who either converge or collide at the climax of each story. Cumulatively, the conflicts among these characters describe the tensions at the heart of the modern South among the rising Southern Black and poor white Southerner, the rising lower class and the historically established upper class, the increasingly educated newer generation and the tradition-bound older one. With an anthropologist’s observation, she captures the dialogue and thoughts of her characters, and yet she moves beyond linguistic accuracy to dramatize the rich texture at the heart of Southern life. Does her ability to transcend the role of a traditional observer reflect that

she is writing about her own Southern world, one in which she does not have to learn a different language or set of customs? One might question, though, whether every “indigenous” observer can see so clearly. On the other hand, O’Connor’s particular life history might cause us to question the breadth of her representation of the South. Just as a number of the stories depict the arrogance of a young adult with pretensions of intellectual superiority and yet the need of parental support, O’Connor, on the brink of forging her career as a writer independently, had to return to her mother’s farm for the remainder of her short life because of a terminal illness. In addition, O’Connor describes herself as “seeing” the world from the point of view of Catholicism.

A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain
by Robert Olen Butler

Winner of the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, Butler’s collection of short stories provides another interesting twist to the series theme. Like O’Connor, he renders the world of the South, the Louisiana Gulf Coast to be exact. Unlike her, though, he is not from the South; he moved from the north to Louisiana in 1985. Nevertheless, he is a close observer of southern Louisiana as well as the Vietnamese expatriates who live there. That Butler worked as a translator for the United States Army in Vietnam is important data to understand the lens through which he observes. Telling each of the fifteen stories from the first person point of view of a different Vietnamese character, Butler seems to capture their experience and voice more convincingly than any work of history, anthropology, or autobiography. He strives to transcend the conflict between the “self” and the “other.” As an American observer of the Vietnamese, he evokes the trauma of their war memories and the uncertainty of their cultural dislocation. The blending of family drama with American pop culture and Vietnamese folklore yields a rich tapestry of incredibly comic stories like “Love” and “The American Couple” to deeply moving ones like “The Trip Back” and “The Clearing.” In the concluding title story, Butler writes a story world that will be remembered as long as there are people who can read. As an old man is dying, Ho Chi Minh appears to him in his dreams, and the two of them seem to reach a wisdom that passes beyond understanding. Whether or not an individual can transcend this own culture and life experience to show the world through the eyes of refugees connects this book to the deeper dimensions of the series theme.

An American Childhood
by Annie Dillard

In the autobiography of her childhood and adolescence, Dillard creates a hybrid between the fieldwork techniques of an anthropologist and the poetic prose of a lyrical novelist. In writing her earlier Pulitzer Prize winning *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she describes her practice of recording observations on hundreds of note cards as she explores a small stream running through Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains and the devastation of Hurricane Agnes that transforms the creek into a vast destructive force. This scientific observation of the world carries over into *An American Childhood* as she describes the history and

topography of Pittsburgh with the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers mingling to form the westward bound Ohio. Her detailed depiction of life in Pittsburgh in the 1950s and of her father's attempt to journey down the Mississippi like Mark Twain also conveys the flavor of ethnography. As an observer of childhood, she can be seen as describing an "other"—the child that she was—and how that child grew up within the culture of Pittsburgh with all of its implicit assumptions about what life is and how it is to be lived. Interestingly, this dimension of the book could also be viewed as a recording of how a child is like an anthropologist in trying to figure out the topography of her culture. Nevertheless, the book is also a very personal memoir of such experiences as overcoming her fear of the dark, discovering boys, and wondering "what would you do if you had fifteen minutes to live before the bomb went off." As an adult reflecting upon her childhood, she can be seen as excavating the memories of her earlier "self" and how she grew up in a particular time and place. In passages of rhapsodic prose, she often seems to be capturing the very moments when she becomes conscious of her "self" as both the feeler and the felt, as both the observer and the observed: "Time streamed in full flood beside me on the kitchen floor, time roared raging beside me down its swollen banks; and when I woke I was so startled I fell in. Who could ever tire of this heart-stopping transition, of this breakthrough shift between seeing and knowing you see, between being and knowing you be?"

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