



Journeys into ‘the heart of interpretation’: Narrative, culture and meaning

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“the issue of communicating across cultural boundaries is a major challenge to the very foundations of our dominant theoretical frameworks”

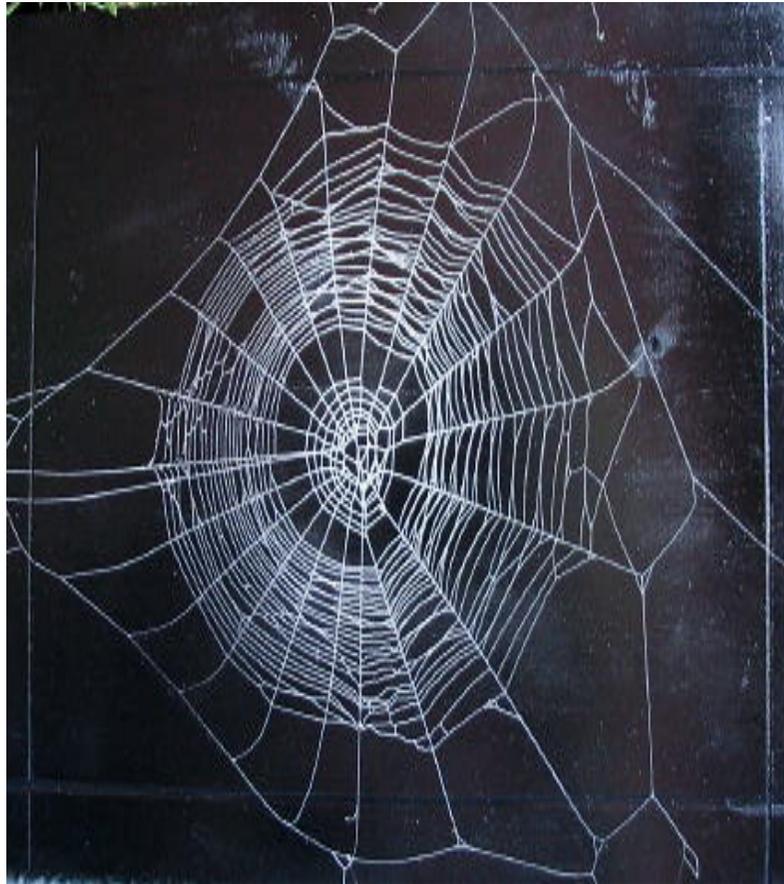
Erica Apfelbaum

Cross cultural research and the narrative imagination



‘to become world citizens we must cultivate in ourselves the capacity for a sympathetic imagination’

Marcus Aurelius



... man is an animal
suspended in webs of
significance he himself
has spun... I take culture
to be those webs, and the
analysis of it to be ... an
interpretive one in search
of meaning....

Clifford Geertz (1973),

*The Interpretation of
Culture*

Culture and meaning



Culture... is public, like a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid... The thing to ask about a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid is ... what their import is: what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that, in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said.

Clifford Geertz (1973),
The Interpretation of Culture

Research as conversation



We are not ... seeking either to become natives... or to mimic them. ..We are seeking...to converse with them, a matter a great deal more difficult, and not only with strangers, than is commonly recognized.

Clifford Geertz (1973)

Shifting perspective



Ethnographers begin research with a set of questions, revise them throughout the course of inquiry, and in the end emerge with different questions than they started with. One's surprise at the answer to a question, in other words, requires one to revise the question until lessening surprises or diminishing returns indicate a stopping point .

Renato Rosaldo (1989), *Culture and truth*

Autobiographical memory



... the Western notion of autobiographical remembering as intimately connected to the development of an autonomous self is only one possible form in which individuals remember their pasts.

Wang, Q. and J. Brockmeier (2002)

“Autobiographical remembering as cultural practice”

Talking about identity

I found it rather shocking because I felt it was very self-indulgent. I think that's what hit me and I think after our discussion I had felt the same... my reactions were "Oh dear, we do try to get away from our egos – how do you break out of the circle of your ego- and here I am locked into it."

Eileen

I don't really think of myself as having an identity. Perhaps you as the younger generation think more in that kind of way. I wouldn't think many people go on consciously thinking about themselves really.

Mary

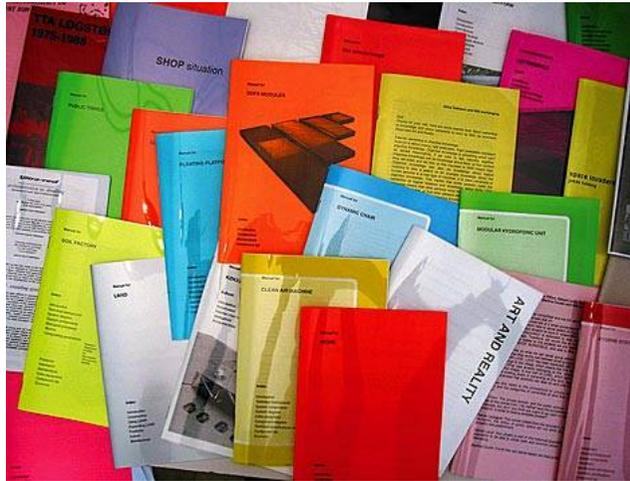


The ethics of researching ‘the other’



At the time of my testimony I had no idea what the consequences of ‘public’ could have meant in the context of public hearings. The fact that my testimony could be appropriated, interpreted, re-interpreted, re-told and sold was not what I expected...

Yazir Henri, (2003)“Reconciling reconciliation”



In the last 10 years we have had a flurry of protocols, guidelines for non-indigenous workers ...In addition is the move to awareness by non-indigenous of the importance of reflecting on their practices and motivations in order to identify forms of oppression masked by good behaviour. But like the layers of an onion, writers peel back the inherent difficulties of such research when trying to situate themselves as useful and unoppressive, only to find more to question underneath.

Jane Selby, (2004) “Disruptions of identity”



You can see it, can't you, how unemployment, fascism, war preparations, political reaction... one knew that all the right-wing conservatives were really anti-semitic and pro-Hitler in their heart of hearts, and they really wanted Hitler to attack Russia... one saw in Russia this wonderful, creative, just, egalitarian society with infinite potential, and everything seemed to add up, and everything seemed to cut the same way.

Christopher Cornford



You suddenly see the world in a different perspective, the world becomes much more luminous and exciting and comprehensible and involving and significant and you feel that you have a sort of function in the world, as distinct from being a little dry lead that is blown around in the world.

‘Wall sickness’



“Wall sickness” was the eternal, lamenting analysis of our life blighted and circumscribed by *Die Mauer*. It came from being in a cage in the centre of Europe. Wall-sickness was boredom. We felt condemned to utter, excruciating dullness, sealed off from everything that happened in the world around us. Wall-sickness was loneliness, the feeling that you were condemned to die without having ever seen Naples, or Venice, or Paris, or London.

Jens Reich (1990)

“Reflections on becoming an East German
dissident,
on losing the Wall and a country

Strange to say, I am not happy and neither are others around me. Now that the state is decaying, people begin to yearn for some of its more sympathetic traits. In a peculiar way, many of us feel homesick for that inefficient and lazy society which is so remote from the tough and competitive society into which we are now thrown.... So we say farewell, but with an oppressive sense of uneasiness

Jens Reich 1990

The opening of the Berlin Wall, November 9, 1989





*The Trabant,
Symbol of East Germany*

On the way home [at about 10:30 pm] I noticed many people all running into the same direction... they were all running to the end of the world... the street was full of cars and one could hardly walk at all... I then walked with the stream and got to the border crossing, Bornholmerstrasse... which was the first crossing to be opened. Two hundred meters from here.



Bornholmerstrasse November 9 1989



It was so crammed full with people you couldn't move. And everybody was pushing through the crossing. The policemen were just standing around, they didn't know what to do and were completely puzzled. I asked a few people... what was happening. Of course, I know, I could see, but I didn't actually, I didn't understand.



And I stood there for about a half hour in this crowd and then went home and switched the television on. Then I watched everything on television, transmissions from everywhere, Kudamm and all other border crossings. And I could see that people were coming over, that is as seen from the west.



Berlin Wall at Potsdamer Platz, August 1962

.... I was totally paralysed...
all this continued for the
next few days and it took
me a whole week before I
went across, Potsdamerstr.
It is difficult to describe...
this was such a very
elementary transformation
of one's existence, of ... the
whole world in a way...



November 10, 1989

I'll try to explain. I have lived.. I have been in Berlin since '73 and I have always lived two hundred meters from the wall. And this wall, to me, has become a symbol of captivity in every respect, also in a metaphoric, symbolic sense. And this is what I have been ramming my head against for the last twenty years. And I had, as a way of survival, I had resolved to ignore this wall as far as I could... And I tried to do the same throughout the week, when the wall had gone. I did not only try to suppress the fact that the wall had been there previously, but I also tried to suppress the fact that it had gone. And it didn't work.



When I went across the wall for the first time, I did so at Potsdamer Platz, where there hadn't been a crossing, they had only torn a hole, simply torn a hole into the wall, yes. And that's where I wanted to go through, precisely there. I walked through like a sleepwalker. I could not conceive of the idea up to the moment when I was through, that that was possible. Well, and then I stood for a very long time over at the other side in no-man's land, and could not move forward or backwards. And then I cried, I was totally overwhelmed.



The people of Colorado Springs... pelted us with snowballs, bottles, beer cans, tennis balls, you name it...they spat on us... tried to run us over... There were a couple of times in which people with huge American flags tried to hit us over the head with the actual flagpoles and sort of drape the flags over our heads... There was another time when this pickup truck with some rednecks stopped next to the vigil and they harassed us for a while and then they ran around us with their flag in a circle.



“When I go back I know I shall be out of it; we fellows who’ve spent our lives out here always are.”

Somerset Maugham, *The gentleman in the parlour*

Narrative Imagination:
Enhancing our ability to envision other ‘possible lives’

