

# Afterword: A Return to the Story



Paul Stoller

*Kumba hinka ga charotarey nyumey*  
It takes two hands to nourish a friendship  
Songhay Proverb

Several years ago, I returned to the Republic of Niger after a long hiatus. Indeed, for a long period of time, I had concentrated my ethnographic efforts on writing about West African immigrants in New York City and had put my research in Niger on the back burner. When I returned to Niamey in February 2009, I did so with great expectation. I planned to visit the gravesite of my mentor, Jean Rouch and wanted to begin research on how the introduction of digital technologies had altered urban and rural social life in Western Niger.

February in Niger can be blisteringly hot. For me the searing heat of Niamey had never compelled me to take taxis or rent a vehicle. I had always preferred to walk the dusty traffic-clogged streets of the capital city. On my 2009 trip I ventured out in the early morning and late afternoon, stopping to chat with street merchants or to visit friends at the University of Niamey's Institute de Recherches en Sciences Humaines. One late afternoon as I was debating American politics with a group of people just outside a cell phone charging station, an older man waved at me as he ran across the street. He came up close and pointed his finger in the air as if he was trying to remember something.

"Aren't you that white man who speaks Songhay with a northern accent?"

Onlookers inched closer to hear a potentially interesting conversation.

"I do speak Songhay with a Gao (northern) accent," I admitted.

"Then it is you!"

I looked perplexed.

"Don't you remember me?"

I didn't recognize the man.

"Didn't you used to sit with Diop?"

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“I did.” Diop, a Senegalese man from Dakar, owned a small market stall from which he sold African art. “Yes, we used to talk for hours. We were good friends,” I said, “but I haven’t heard from him in a long time. How is he?”

“I am sad to say that Diop died several years ago.”

“I am so sorry to hear that.”

The man smiled. “You know what I remember about you?”

“What?”

“One day in the late afternoon, you and Diop were sitting next to one another outside of his shop. As usual, Diop was telling a story.”

“And?”

“You laughed so hard you fell off your chair.”

I remembered that moment.

“Afterwards, Diop said that most white men laughed only with their heads, but you, having lived so long among us, had learned to laugh with your body. Diop said that people who couldn’t laugh with their bodies would never understand life in Africa.”

Until that moment I hadn’t fully realized the importance of laughter in the interpersonal dynamics that constitute anthropological fieldwork. I also realized why I had gotten on so well with Nigerien colleagues and friends. I understood why I connected with my mentor Jean Rouch, for whom laughter created the bonds of long friendships from which emerged some of his greatest films, *Jaguar* (1955), *Petit a Petit* (1971), *Cocorico* (1975), and *Madame l’eau* (1992). I then grasped that it had been laughter—and stories—that had nourished the relationships I had slowly and gradually developed in Niger and New York City. Put another way, there is no separation of the personal and the professional and no Cartesian disconnect between emotion and analysis. As anthropologists we are personally implicated in networks of social relations the depth and quality of which shape the depth and quality of our work. “It takes two hands,” as the Songhay elders like to say, “to nourish a friendship.”

Despite these ever-present field realities, which constitute the here and now of social life, there is ongoing academic resistance to the emotional presence of ethnographers in their ethnographic works. There is, of course, a very long history of the intellectual separation of head and heart. It began with Plato’s *The Republic* (2016) in which the sage warns of the danger of poets and dramatists whose works connect to the heart and evoke emotion. Throughout the centuries that followed scholars continuously reinforced those deeply classical principles. Stories are not serious science and have little or no place in academic discourse. Humor indicates a lightness of thought and must be reserved for the margins of scholarly representation. These conventions have resulted in what has been called plain style—the bloodless prose of (social) scientific reports. Indeed, in their Introduction to this engagingly important collection, *Affective Dimensions of Fieldwork and Ethnography*, Thajib, Stodulka, and Dinkelaker write:

Readers may find that in some of the contributions the writing style and the personal presence of the authors are jarring at times. This impression may be attributed to the impetus among many of the authors to address affective challenges in doing fieldwork that contributed to what they consider substantial anthropological insights of their projects. This is not an easy task considering that genres which engage in affective scholarship when it

comes to fieldwork and ethnography have so far positioned themselves as ‘*anthro-poetics*’ (Behar 1996; Rosaldo 2014) or ‘*auto-ethnography*’ (Ellis 2004), and hence if not at the margins, at least distinctive from mainstream ‘academic anthropology’ (this volume, pp. 8–9).

But can we comprehend the human condition without confronting our emotions?

As Songhay elders like to say: “You can’t follow two paths with one foot,” which is an oblique way of suggesting that any description of social relations that avoids human emotions is an incomplete, if not empty, endeavor. It is, after all, such core emotional sets as love and hate, fidelity and betrayal, and courage and fear—to name only a few—that shape the human condition. Put another way, the 27 ethnographically rich and conceptually provocative essays that comprise this volume demonstrate powerfully the need for the inclusion of the affective elements of fieldwork and ethnography.

The essays in this volume defy simple and specific categorization, which means that in this brief Afterword space precludes a detailed summarization of each contribution. Even so, there are some general topics that weave their way through all of the chapters. Here are some of the important themes that the contributors consider in their essays:

- the relationship between the personal and the professional;
- the link between emotions and personal relations in the field;
- personal implication in field relations;
- reciprocity (or giving back) in the dynamics in field relationships;
- the space between emotion and rationality;
- personal transformation in the field;
- fieldwork and family dynamics;
- the messiness of social relations compromised by disappointment and betrayal;
- embodiment and human emotions;
- the sexuality and the human emotions of “being there” and “being here”;
- the presence of existential uncertainty and anger in field settings;
- the problem of failure;
- the emotional whys and wherefores of apprenticeship; and
- human vulnerability and affect.

The powerful exploration of these under-explored issues in this volume enriches immeasurably the ethnographic record and deepens significantly anthropological insights about the nature of human being.

But how can we explore these essential human emotions that undergird our life in the world? How personal should our personal implications be reflected in a text or a film? How can emotions guide us to rational insight? Should we express our vulnerabilities in our representations? What are the limits of authorial presence in an anthropological text? How much is too much? How little is too little? These are questions we should ponder when writing about human emotions in fieldwork and ethnography.

It is one thing to analyze affective dimensions in a typical academic essay. It is quite another thing to evoke the affective dimensions of human being in a work of narrative non-fiction, a poem, a documentary film, fiction, a media installation or a blog. In the aforementioned academic essay, scholars attempt to ‘tell’ their readers about a subject. In more narrative forms of expression, scholars-artists (say, anthropologists who communicate their scholarship through narrative non-fiction, poetry, film, or media installations) attempt to ‘show’ their readers the texture of the subject. One tack is denotative; the other tack is evocative. One is a tack works well for the analysis of data and the construction of theory; the other tack works well for the sensuous description of human emotions that can evoke theory. The denotative approach to scholarly representation is a necessarily limited path to social description. The evocative orientation to scholarly representation is a necessarily full-bodied approach to understanding more completely the human condition. If you use narrative to evoke a world, you understand fully that “one foot cannot follow two paths” (see Stoller 2014, 2018).

So how do we confront the personal and professional perils routinely encountered on the ethnographic path? How can we take the detour that explores the emotions in order to convey deep anthropological insights about human being in the world? The answer is deceptively simple: we embrace the story and construct narratives that capture the ineffable complexity of life. As the late Edith Turner wrote: the ineffability of “(...) *communitas* can only be conveyed through stories” (2012, p. 1).

Although I found the essays in this book to be ethnographically rich and conceptually forceful, I often found in them an uneasy alliance between narrative and exposition, between evocation and denotation. Such textual imbalance is not at all surprising given the aforementioned institutional constraints that shape academic discourses that foreground explication (telling) and background narrative (showing).

If we look to narrative ethnography, there are concrete moves, borrowed from fiction, that scholars can make to overcome institutional obstacles that obstruct the powerful evocation of human emotion. Writers who want to emotionally awaken their readers tend to produce works that feature short sentences in active voice. They write relatively short paragraphs and craft short-chaptered books. Texts that ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’ tend to sensuously evoke space/place as if those spaces and places are alive with memory and feeling. Texts that ‘show’ also feature direct—as opposed to indirect dialogue—in which characters speak idiosyncratically. In these kinds of texts informants become characters who move, stand, or gesture in particular ways. In the end, these textual moves breathe life onto the page and sensuously evoke human emotions.

It is a profound scholarly challenge to write for, about, and with emotion. If you choose to employ narrative techniques to evoke ethnographic emotions, it doesn’t mean that you have to abandon traditional academic discourse or, for that matter, theory development. It does mean, though, that you foreground story and storytelling through the evocation of space/place, the articulation of direct dialogue and the development of character. As in the story I recounted at the outset of this Afterword,

narrative foregrounding can set the stage for blending story, analysis and theory into a seamless text that presents the human emotions in all their vexing glory.

The challenge, however, is far more than a textual move. Writing about personal implication, sexuality, fear, courage, love, and hate creates in the anthropologist a deep source of vulnerability. It is a choice that is existentially transformative. What does such a transformation imply? For me, it suggests a fundamental challenge. That challenge is for the next generation of anthropologists—and to the contributors to this volume—to approach the world as would an ethnographic painter for whom there is no absolute Cartesian divide between mind and body, between ‘subjective’ experience and ‘objective’ analysis. By taking an embodied painterly approach to the world, we follow a path toward the ‘there is’ on which we see-think-feel from the inside. As the great painter Paul Klee wrote:

In a forest I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me. I as there, listening...I think the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not penetrate it (...). I expect to be inwardly submerged, buried. I paint to break out (Charbonnier 1959 cited in Merleau-Ponty 1964a, p. 31).

Such an artistic move takes you to edge of ethnographic expression. Consider the insightful words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964b, pp. 122–123):

Given the experience, which may be banal but for the writer, captures a particular savor of life, given, in addition, words forms, phrasing, syntax, even literary genres, modes of narrative that through custom are always endowed with a common meaning – the writer’s task is to choose, assemble, wield and torment those instruments in such a way that they induce the same sentiment of life that dwells in the writer at every moment, deployed henceforth in an imaginary world and in the transparent body of language.

If ethnographers choose to explore the human emotions from the inside, they need to approach the forest like Paul Klee an open themselves to experience, an opening to that brings into relief the considerable existential risks of vulnerability.

Vulnerability, of course, brings personal risk and discomfort, but it also opens a space for narratives—stories—through which is established a powerful connection between the ethnographic and her or his audience.

In this way, the (...) [ethnographer] (...)“using evocative language, brings life to the field and beckons (...) [audiences] (...) to discover something new – a new theoretical insight, a new thought, a new feeling or appreciation (...). And just as writers need to spend many years searching for their own voices, so we anthropologists need to find a ‘voice’ and create works which bring readers to dwell within us and we walk along our solitary paths in the field, exposing our hearts so full of excitement, fear and doubt (Stoller 1989, pp. 54–55).

The contributors to this volume present us a provocative challenge. Reading between the lines of these bold essays, are we not asked to take a leap of faith into the nether world of ethnographic narratives through which ethnographers reconnect fully with human emotions? That leap takes us into the spaces between things, where we find the story and know it, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, for the first time.

When we embrace the story, we rediscover the field, reclaim our human emotions, and remember ourselves. That is a challenge worthy of our full attention.

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