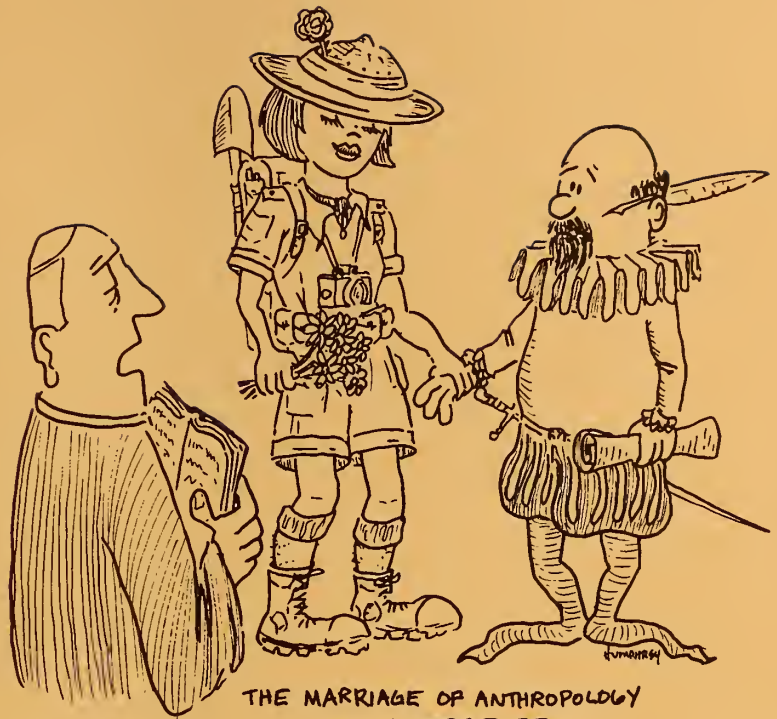


## TEACHER'S CORNER: TEACHING ANTHROPOLOGY THROUGH LITERATURE

Can anthropology and literature be married? As a high school and university teacher who has tried to integrate literature and anthropology along the way, I was intrigued by a graduate seminar, "Latin American Cultures Through Literature," taught in 1984 by Catherine Allen, Associate Professor of Anthropology, George Washington University. In this course selected literary and ethnographic works were examined as cultural documents. During a recent interview, Professor Allen shared her concepts, readings, and activities for this course.

Can anthropology and literature be compared at all? Both anthropologists and literary critics employ textual analysis (using "text" broadly). Both share common interests in symbolism, structuralism, and semiotics (the relationship of form and meaning). The goals of literature and anthropology are often similar. Both are means of exploring "the ultimate concerns" of human existence, whether these be the dynamics of social interaction and human relationships, the relationships of "man" and environment, or the problems of meaning--how to comprehend and convey it. Finally, the writing of literature and the writing of anthropology involve translation of various kinds.

Why, then, Latin America? First, Allen's fieldwork has been in Latin America, primarily with the Quechua-speaking peoples in Peru. Second, Latin America has been the scene of both great destruction and of great creativity in the centuries since its first colonization by Europeans. The confrontation of the Old and New Worlds brought alien cultures into contact, such as African, Hispanic, and Native American, producing new cultural syntheses. Out of this process has



come some of the greatest literature and the most penetrating social commentary of our time.

How was the course organized? After establishing a theoretical framework derived from Clifford Geertz's The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973) and Rolena Adorno's (ed.) From Oral to Written Tradition, the course focused on how Latin American writers--"El Inca," Garcilaso de la Vega, José María Arguedas, Octavio Paz, Gabriel Garcia Márquez--present their own societies, grappling with their pivotal position as writers between two worlds. Then, the students explored European and North American conceptions of Latin America in works by anthropologists Claude Levi-Strauss and Charles Wagley, and by novelists D. H. Lawrence and Peter Matthiessen.

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When Allen initially taught the seminar, Geertz was one of the few persons writing about interpretive anthropology. Geertz's technique of "thick" description is central to understanding just how similar a novelist and anthropologist can be. According to Geertz, using Max Weber's definition, "Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (chapter 1, p. 5). Those webs constitute culture. Geertz describes an event one night in Morocco in 1912 when French soldiers, a Jewish trader, and Berbers misunderstood each other about a mock sheep raid. The anthropologist would first have to understand three different forms of interpretation in this situation--French, Jewish, and Berber. Then she would try to determine why their presence together produced a situation in which "systematic misunderstanding reduced traditional form to social farce" (p. 9). Yes, the anthropologist would also pursue the orthodox routine of data collection--interview informants, observe rituals, elicit kin terms, and take census of households. But the anthropologist, as in the Morocco situation, is faced with many complex structures or webs of concepts intertwined with each other. The anthropologist decides what is significant and writes her interpretation. What is the meaning of a wink, a mock sheep raid, a cycle of gift giving, a football game, or the pattern of moving a herd of animals from one water hole to the next? As Geertz states:

What, in a place like Morocco, most prevents those of us who grew up winking other winks or attending other sheep from grasping what people are up to is not ignorance as to how cognition works...but a lack of familiarity with the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs.

Culture is a context, something within which social behaviors,

institutions, events, or processes can be "intelligably--that is thickly--described" (p. 14). Once the anthropologist understands those signs, those webs of significance, and writes her interpretation, her descriptions can only be thick, not thin. If an anthropologist can understand the meaning of those human behaviors, she can enlarge "the universe of human discourse" so that people can meet and even understand people who live on the opposite side of the globe (p. 14). That is the primary aim of anthropology for Geertz.

Ethnographies, however, should never be presumed to be the culture. They are the ethnographers' interpretations; hence the term interpretive anthropology. Anthropological writings are fictions in the sense that they are made, and in the sense that they are descriptions from the actors' (or characters') perspectives (p. 15). In the course of doing this, the anthropologist is trying to solve the puzzle--What manner of humans are these?

If ethnographies are interpretations, then meaning becomes a central concern, and an affinity with literature becomes obvious. "Cultural analysis is...guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, or drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape" (p. 20). Meaning, a term so elusive yet so central to philosophy and literary criticism, is, for Geertz, at the heart of the discipline of anthropology (p. 20). Geertz applies these abstract ideas in his concrete field study of the Balinese cockfight. He treats the cockfight as the text to be interpreted, because he considers culture as an assemblage of texts. (See "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," chapter 15.)

Although Geertz provided the main theoretical framework for the seminar,

Adorno's text addressed the Latin American context. It helped students consider the transition from an oral to a written tradition and the attempt of many Latin American novelists to keep the oral tradition alive by writing with many of the same rhythms and stories. The novelist and the anthropologist can chronicle the transition and the preservation.

The rest of Allen's seminar focused on the comparison of anthropology and literature and on the insiders' and outsiders' perspective. The first group of writers speak as Latin Americans. Garcilaso de la Verga, author of The Incas (Commentarios Reales de los Incas), was an early chronicler, who as the son of an Inca noblewoman gives a royal interpretation of Incas. José María Arguedas, an anthropologist and author of Deep Rivers (Los Rios Profundos), describes the problems of the mestizo, whereas Gabriel Garcia Márquez, in One Hundred Years of Solitude (Cien Años Soledad), explores the problems of identity--cultural, national, and personal, and how Latin American cultures are consciously searching for an identity. The themes of solitude and identity echo in Octavio Paz's The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico (El Laberinto de la Soledad).

Unlike these insiders' view of Latin American cultures, the next group of writers provided an outsiders' view of Latin America. Dramatically different from Paz's vision of Mexico, D. H. Lawrence in The Plumed Serpent does not interpret Mexican culture but rather uses it to develop a contrast between the stereotyped earthy, passionate Mexican and the uptight, degenerate English. In Tristes Tropiques on the other hand, Claude Lévi-Strauss expresses his philosophical romanticism. He uses Brazil and the destruction of indigenous people as a commentary on the decline of the West. He certainly gives much valid ethnographic detail about Brazil, but

the book is also a vehicle for comment on his own culture. At Play in the Fields of the Lord by Peter Matthiesen is set in Peru where in a mestizo town missionaries, North American mercenaries, and an alienated North American Indian dramatically and tragically come together. This outsider novelist bases his research on his travels and other ethnographic monographs. Charles Wagley is a cultural ecologist, and in his straightforward ethnography, Welcome of Tears: The Tapirape Indians of Brazil, he describes an almost decimated group in contemporary Brazil. The students can then compare ethnographers' approaches (Wagley's and Lévi-Strauss') with each other as well as with the approaches of non-Latin novelists.

Catherine Allen's course ended with One Hundred Years of Solitude so that students both began and ended with a Latin-American perspective. This book is representative of "magical realism," a writing style that is a product of Latin America. In magical realism, narrative moves in and out of ordinary and non-ordinary experience in a natural matter-of-fact manner. It occurs when different cultures are juxtaposed, and co-existence prospers, by people moving back and forth among different cultures, negotiating multiple cultural realities.

Students presented their own research studies at the end of the course. For example, one student compared Zora Neale Hurston as a novelist and as an anthropologist. Another student compared Arguedas' use of light as a literary motif with the Quechua conceptualization of light.

According to Allen, the novelist and the anthropologist, and even some of the characters, are envoys or cultural mediators who interpret and explain culture to both participants and outsiders. This was a major theme for the course. In addition, the novels were vehicles for examining

anthropological concepts such as myth, incest taboos, or culture change.

When Allen teaches the course again, she will incorporate recent writers who, like Geertz, treat anthropology as an interpretive activity. George E. Marcus and James Clifford recently edited an anthology of articles titled Writing Culture: The Poetics of Ethnography (Univ. of Calif. Press, 1986). Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences, by George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fisher (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), considers ethnography and interpretive anthropology.

Allen intends to emphasize oral traditions more, using her own Quechua narratives; she finds anthropological transcription--the fixing of word to gesture in written form--challenging. For example, Dennis Tedlock emphasizes the dialogue between anthropology and "the native." Translator of Popul Vu in The Spoken Word and the World of Interpretation, he looks at the performance aspects of tradition, using techniques of dramatic script and concrete poetry to convey a sense of the oral performance on the printed page.

Robert Penn Warren once said that fiction allows us to experience lives beyond ourselves, "to live lives of potential or unrealized selves.... Ultimately fiction can satisfy our deepest need--the need of feeling our life to be in itself significant." That certainly echoes the definition of culture--the webs of significance. Ethnography can help us imaginatively live in another culture and understand why such behavior, perhaps vastly different from our own, makes sense and has meaning. Some novelists and anthropologists are able to combine both fiction and ethnography helping to increase both our understanding of ourselves and of our common humanity.