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Writing out the loss: intersections and conversations between poetry and ethnography

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Abstract

This article was co-written over a period of time by the poet, Andrew McMillan and an ethnographer, Kate Pahl. In the article we explore the connections between ethnography as practice and the mode of inquiry that is poetry. Presented in two voices, the article makes sense of the different epistemological questions connected to the writing of poetry and the processes and practices of ethnography, including the inscription of reality into fieldnotes. The article is an attempt to bridge the divide between two disciplines; poetry and ethnography, but at the same time draw out some of the differences. In the course of the article questions emerge about the process of writing poetry, the nature of fieldnotes and ways of making sense of these processes and practices. The focus of the study was a research project called “Language as Talisman” which also explored issues of language, power, identity and dialect in Rawmarsh, South Yorkshire, UK. We consider, in relation to qualitative research, how these modes can lead to recognition of what is not achievable in qualitative research.

Keywords: Language, Power, Poetry, Ethnography, Loss.

Writing out the loss: intersections and conversations between poetry and ethnography

Introduction

This article was co-written over a period of time by the poet, Andrew McMillan and an ethnographer, Kate Pahl. They encountered each other through a project called 'Language as Talisman' which explored, with a group of people from English, Education, as well as artists and poets, the powerful role of language in young people's lives. Andrew and Kate began a conversation through writing. The first part of the article was written separately on train journeys; Andrew's train journey was Manchester to London and Kate's Bristol to Sheffield. The second part was written partly in a park in Rawmarsh, an area of Rotherham, in South Yorkshire, UK and partly in the library in central Rotherham. Sam Rae, an English undergraduate attached to the project Kate and Andrew were working on, also attended the meetings in the park, and the library. The final editing was done in a clothes shop called Pollyanna in Barnsley, which is where Andrew grew up and where Kate shopped when she was conducting an ethnographic study of children's meaning making (Pahl, 2011). In the article we explore the connections between the mode of inquiry that is poetry and the mode of enquiry that is ethnography. We consider, in relation to qualitative research, how these modes can lead to recognition of what is not achievable in qualitative research.

This is how it happens sometimes; you're in a car. You're driving along. The road is cracking under tyres in the heat like autumn leaves. An idea comes, swiftly, as if from over the crest of a mounted hill- at first you are unsure. You slow down, you roll quietly onwards, looking the idea up and down- it seems dangerous- dressed scantily in just the brief slips of a possible theory. It is enticing you, or it is scared or it is merely observing you considering it- the idea, the possibility of theory. That poetry is lifelong ethnography.

Ginsberg talks of the feeling that he encountered when writing Howl (Ginsberg, 1956) whilst living in New York. The idea that if you walk and walk through the streets of New York you'll be on the verge of tears but you have to walk all day to get that feeling. He was drawing a parallel with writing. That you had to write and write until you got a place of emotional rawness but that you had to write all day to get to that place. Sitting all day with some people, observing them, by the end of the day you might be overwhelmed, but you have to sit with them all day to get that point. Walking and walking all day through the streets. Sitting and sitting all day with a family. Pushing oneself to the point of being completely open and available to witnessing, processing and examining what is going on around you. Poetry as lifelong ethnography.

It happens like this sometimes as well, the revelation that a colleague is a former poetry editor of *Critical Quarterly*. There is, always as an editor, the feeling of inadequacy to what was being witnessed in the opening of envelopes, in the judging of poems. We are never adequate, never commensurate to what it is we observe; that which is observed is always above us- poetry, or the ethnographic interpretation is the ladder through which we reach parity with our subject, with our subjects.

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It happens like this, as an editor. You spread the poems out on the floor, you sit with them, you listen to them. You interrogate them, you ask them questions. You see how they speak to each other and then you decide what it is they are saying to you, specifically you, in that room at that time, and then you decide whether to take things further and there is the writing of an editorial in which you seek to examine and unpick what it was the poems in the room that day at that time were saying.

Poetry as ethnography. As a sitting and a listening and a dialogue and then a synthesis of thought. So when a poem like *Tryptichon: three views of Pittsburgh* is opened in front of you, and you spread it like drawing curtains on a warm morning, you see what Shaheen F. Dill (1994) is saying. Sitting with him. Listening to him. Or perhaps just letting him show you where it is he has built his poem. You sit with it.

You let it speak.

“they are tiny; their bodies dolls” (p.71) Shaheen tells you. Or you tell yourself as you read. It is Shaheen’s observation of the prisoners in his poem. It is your observation of the people he is drawing. Is this not ethnography- to observe, to draw parallel- metaphor is the only true way of bridging the gap between oneself and another. That maybe you had a doll when you were younger. Maybe that is why the

men look like dolls. Maybe it becomes a theory on the manipulation of the lower strata of society. Maybe it is simply about dolls. You sit in the poem. You look at the tiny figures. You remember your doll. Perhaps, somewhere in a time that is either this time or a later one, there will be a study of prisoners and dolls. “Something indeed is breathing here” (p.72) Shaheen will later say to you. You will later say to yourself.

The poem is alive; it is a moving, shifting presence in the room. It is the body which entices you as you look out of the car. You arrive at the end of the poem. You feel as though you have been walking for hours. The prisoners have got smaller. “Something indeed is breathing”. That is true of everywhere. It is a poetic pursuit to say what. It is an ethnographic pursuit to say what.

Park conversation 1

Kate: You think about poetry as being a saga of lost objects? (Bissell, 2009)

Andrew: Poetry in the Lacanian sense is about what is lost because poetry always fails. Poetry is failure. Poetry is about what you have lost and what you think you want to regain.

Kate: Do you think poetry is about abandonment?

Andrew: It is about the poetry of successive failure to get back to that object to that thing over there.

Kate: When you are ethnographer, the idea of ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1993) so all you have is the idea of ‘true fiction’ so ethnography is not a realist tale, it is ‘fiction’ (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). The purpose of the ethnographer is to do something with language as experience which is not necessarily true.

Ethnography is a process of recording cultural engagement with a site over time, drawing on traditions from social anthropology (Macdonald, 2007).

Poetry is cultural engagement with the world (McMillan, 2012)

This recording process happens through the practice of constructing ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1993) of events as they unfold in the field. Much of what is

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captured is written down in the form of fieldnotes (Sanjek, 1990). Musing on fieldnotes, I realise I am exposing the underbelly of ethnographic endeavour. They 'stand for field experience as well – that seemingly mystical experience' (Ottenberg, 1990, p.143.). Ethnographers typically scare each other with stories of lost fieldnotes (Davies, 1977), as scary as lost digital archives or lost films. The saga of lost objects (Bissell, 2009) is alive and well in ethnographic circles.

Thick description is then, perhaps, the poet's notebook- carried at all times, on every train journey, on every work trip, in which the poet records their thoughts, their ideas, their first whisperings of a line. It is thick description at first- the poet's job is to thin it out; think of the world as a rather complex fruit, think of the poet, or some far realm of their brain, as the juicer, distilling the ungainly layers and skins into something pure and fine and concentrated. "Field experience", or the experience of the everyday observed, together with the "mystical experience" that poetry is somehow trying to capture; two things lent up against each other, the makings of the poem. "The saga of lost objects" is poetry, poetry is the journey to get back to the lost object. Imagine, if there was a word that described perfectly how I felt, how much I loved you, then I would simply say that word to you and have done. There isn't, there is us, at one end of a vast field, and there is what we want to say, miniscule, timidly hiding at the other end. Between us there is a vacuum, a great hole which seems uncrossable. We can't go through it, we can't go under it, or over it. We have to go around it. We have to go around it. Poetic language, simile, metaphor, imagery, are all obfuscation, they all oscillate around the loss, around our inability to get to the pure language object that we really desire. Poetry is propensity, never pure pleasure. The saga of lost objects is alive and well in ethnography. The lost object can never be reclaimed, at least not by poetry. But each new poem, each new distillation of the thick description of the world, brings one slightly closer.

James Clifford describes the three distinct moments in the constitution of fieldnotes (Clifford, 1990, p.51). The first is 'a moment of inscription' (Clifford, p.51). Clifford describes this as a process that could be as simple as making a mental note.

Poems can't be forced. Be suspicious of those who think of an idea for a poem, something they want to say and then set about crafting a vessel to despatch their thought to the world. It leads to a beautiful nothingness. Poetry comes suddenly, not fully formed, it drags itself in, one limb, one fleck, one line at a time. A mental note.
A quick scribble.

Sanjek (1990) describes this moment as when he might write 'scratch notes' which can be then turned into descriptive fieldnotes that evening. So I can inscribe in my notebook or capture with an audio recorder a phrase or note an event or the smallest interaction within a series of small, invisible, not yet recorded notes. If I can hold this in my head until the evening, I am lucky. Clifford (1986) moves on to the second moment as being the moment of transcription, which might include writing down something someone says, a moment where oral talk is inscribed into something more solid.

The poem builds slowly, another line is added; you sit and you observe it grow before you on the page. It could be a long time before you fully understand what it is you are

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witnessing, what the poem on the page is telling you. If you're lucky it will say something to you. If not, then at least you got to sit and observe a process of something coming into life, like something almost, almost, but not quite being said.

This could be as simple as taking out a digital audio recorder when a story is begun, or a moment of recording that can be extended and purposeful. From this process comes 'description, the making of a more or less coherent representation of an observed cultural reality' (1990, p. 51).

For myself, the cultural reality is not coherent. The world, observed by ethnographers and regular onlookers is a mess of numbers and words and wars and famines and insults and ideas and oceans and it is too big, too big now for one man to contain ("I am vast, I contain multitudes" (Whitman, 1995)- the Whitmanesque idea no longer holds true)

This is the moment when I might write fieldnotes, and, drawing on training I received from Brian Street (Heath & Street, 2008), I use a three column method, in which the first left hand column is description, the second interpretation, and the final column, only filled in later, is analysis. This system comes from Wollcott (1994) *Transforming Qualitative Data*. Ethnography is, in this sense, a process of inscribing social discourse, of providing a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1993) to record the ebb and flow of everyday life. However, since *Writing Culture* (1986) the processes and practices of ethnography have lessened their grip on the rhetoric of scientific validity, and in the process, have acquired the status of 'true fiction'.

A true fiction. A narrowing down of language, a shrinking, which is also paradoxically a growth, a journey towards an ideal but not the ideal itself. A true fiction. The idea that we can tell the story of the world clearer than it can tell it itself.

Park conversation 2

Sam: Do you push at that boundary of un-knowability or accept it?

Kate: I am into the abandonment – for me it is about the abandonment of practice. I love it when the ethnographic present is inscribed into other people's discourses.

Ethnography is all in the mind. Ottenberg (1990) describes 'another set of notes, however that anthropologists might consider to be incorporeal property. These are the notes in my mind, the memories of my field research. I call them my headnotes. As I collected my written notes, there were many more impressions, scenes, experiences than I wrote down or could possibly have recorded.' (p. 144).

Poetry is the sieving of what we observe through the unconscious mind. The preoccupation of the particular writer is the prism through which the everyday refracts.

Ottenberg (1990) talked about the way in which as he aged, changed, re-married, married again, his headnotes gradually shifted and changed, and finally came to realise that 'the headnotes are always more important than the written notes' (p. 147).

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The sieve is always changing shape, but remains the same recognisable object through the canon of a writer, barring some shock or horror which mutates it (such as war, such as painful death and separation). In poetry the written note is all that matters, it is all that will survive when we are gone. The headnotes, the headnotes are the thing that constantly frustrate, they are the older sibling that can never quite be lived up to. The idea is clear, the line is perfect in the mind. The unconscious mind, though, with its vast cabinets of headnotes, is across a field with an unbridgeable hole in the middle; our conscious mind cannot cross, it can only ever try and reach it. Propensity is poetry, and there is little pleasure in it. The headnotes, the trying to get them to the page.

Ottenberg (1990) called them the 'driving notes' (p.147)

As a side note, poets shouldn't drive. Is straps the headnotes in somewhere tight and puts a safety lock on. It does not allow for the observing of the fieldnotes. Poets should never drive. They should sit on buses, trains, trams, in cars that other people drive. They should let the headnotes move around. They should write field notes. Poets should not drive.

He described the way in which, 'My fieldnotes and headnotes are in constant dialogue' (p.146). It is this dance, this dialogue between fieldnotes and headnotes, which Andrew describes above, a moment of watching and then the dance between the practice of inscription and the moment of watching which we focus on here.

I used to be obsessed with my fieldnotes, with their accuracy and veracity and the small, careful touches that helped me re-enact field visits when I had the time to make sense. The moment of inscription mattered; I liked to describe both feeling and sensory engagement with the field. Now, however, I realise my headnotes have taken over; and have become the organic driving seat of my thinking.

Poetry has to come from something pure and direct. There is something beautiful but vacant in the perfectly crafted, tied up and neat creative-writing-workshop poem. It is like being an ethnographer observing a room of beautiful but ultimately dumb and vapid people. They can't say anything to you beyond their initial aesthetic candour. Poetry which is less neat, less careful, less studied, is sometimes more beautiful; mistakes, or equivocation, are, after all, the condition of the human, 'Howl' is beautiful even though sometimes it falters. Poetry should be the pure organic driving seat of thinking. It should be well crafted, it should be beautifully produced, but it shouldn't ever be stale, an obsession with the accuracy and veracity of the small and careful idea of the poem can be deadly.

Park Conversation 3

Kate: What I like about that bit is the ebb and flow, the waves on the shore. Sometimes we are far apart and sometimes we come together. What do you think about it Sam?

Sam: It's the comparisons that are really interesting between ethnography and poetry.

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Andrew: Maybe this thing about loss is the idea that if the ethnographer is sat in the room, they are in the room but the poet is observing the same scene but they are outside. You as an ethnographer remain inside, observing the scene but the poet is outside, trying to get in through the process of the poem.

Kate: Ethnography is a space of loss, Malinowski (1922) sat on this island, observing everything

Andrew: Him on an island as a prisoner of war, that's the purest piece of ethnography ever. If all ethnography is about trying to return to that pureness in the sense that all poetry is about trying to return to the initial...if all ethnography is about trying to return to that space that Malinowski had in the 1920's then all poetry is about the space you have lost

Kate: Mike Agar (1996) talked about the gap between two worlds, your world and the informants' worlds. I realised this when I wrote about the prayer beads (Pahl 2008)

Andrew: the poem is the bridging of the gap between the world as it is and the world as you see it.

Kate's Unedited Fieldnotes 4th May 2012

The day had been organised around the need for the Computer Science students from the university to come and present their App. They were coming in the afternoon. I had met R (Deputy Head) earlier in the week and he had told me about their new interactional space he called 'Tribe Time'. He said I must come and look at it and come early. I said I would.

I woke up, ate breakfast early, and called to my daughter I would be setting off early. I was in my car by 7. 45. The deputy head had said 'be there for 8. 30'. I had not been sure whether I should go, it seemed a bit early and I said that I might not come until 10. 30 but he said no come, you will see tribe time, it is or interactional space, so I agreed to come early.

On the way, I resolved to text H and V when I got to the school. To my surprise the traffic was light and I realised I would have time. I swung round Sheffield Forgemasters, under the M1 and up through the roundabouts and up Eastwood road. Eastwood road always has a feeling of poverty; girls in short skirts and boys and girls in British Asian dress going to Clifton secondary school. I made it to the roundabout and quickly drove up by the school. I texted H and V at 8. 20. Early. Strange.

I walked into the school conscious I needed a coffee but happy. I signed in on the IPAD and announced I wanted to go to Tribe Time I walked down the corridor and found R and L [class teacher]. R was rushing off and L was preparing her class. I told L I had a copy of my book with her vignette in it. I told R the school would be famous for the quality of the teaching there.

The head teacher met me and was very welcoming, he said I should join the Tribe time. I met a young teaching assistant, he was dynamic and keen and said I should go to his Tribe. I walked into a small room and sat down with a group of children. The teacher said they would answer questions, and would ask me questions. I initially interpreted this as I should ask them questions, and as we were settling down, I asked the boy next to me what his favourite object was and what his name was. I said we

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could mention pets. He described his Staffy dog as being his favourite object. Another boy introduced himself and said his dog was his favourite and he took it for walks. Another child said their X Box was their favourite. Another girl said it was her Wii. The teacher then interrupted and said I could be asked questions. I said my favourite objects were my kittens. The children then took control and asked me questions about myself.

The children were multi age and the idea was they were a tribe. This tribe was called Spyducks. They shouted the name. It seemed that this was the chosen name. They shouted the name to me several times.

Because names are important, because names give you a sense of identity like a statement dog does, in a world which constantly forgets the bottom rungs of the socio-economic ladder. And tribe time is important because it validates the ordinary.

Because a young lad can get up and tell a story about a dog or the fact they fell over, and have no greater yarn to spin than that, and the rest of the tribe can listen, and validate the experience through the discussion of it. Boys who maybe are told to shut up and watch TV at home can make sure their life exists by talking about it. Because telling a story ensures that you aren't forgotten. It's what tribes taught us through oral history. That before you can write, you tell stories of what happened to you. You tell stories about your life. That's how you know you exist. Poetry is, perhaps, the same. By writing about a place like Rawmarsh, like Barnsley, you put down an anchor. You create a new paginated and oral tradition. You ensure that you are alive.

The conversation seemed to centre on pets, particularly pet deaths and grandparents, but this could be my underground interest in the children's own pre-occupations, which are pet deaths and grandparents. A very lively girl asked me lots of questions. Her hand was up all the time and her questions were brilliant.

I wrote an article once in which I said the kids with their hands up all the time were the lines of a poem that come to you and that you should later ignore (YM: Issue 1, Beasts). They are too obvious. Too clankingly smart, too loud. The quiet kids at the back of the class, who rarely speak, who are timid, who are shy; they are often the lines of the poem worth seeking out. They are the ones who will do something brilliant. Or some unimaginable horror.

All around the school, there were details of the tribes. Children put up their favourite things and something about their tribe and choice of name. The school was humming. The Headteacher said there was a bird's nest in the school. We then went into Booktime, in which a huddle of children round a story, with a TA. This story was about floods and as it was raining practically all the time at the moment, seemed very appropriate.

However, I wanted my coffee and snuck away to the Headteachers office, where there was a coffee waiting for me. He was endlessly polite and kind, telling me so many things about the school, how there was a bird's nest in the gutter, and about the hopes he had for the school, the TV studio. At one point, he told me how brilliantly R had done, holding the school for a year.

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I was sitting sipping coffee with R when two girls put their heads round the door. One said, 'If you take they sen to it' and the other I will go and put it t'bin
R gently said, what does they sen mean? The girl said 'themselves'. He then suggested they say that. He then said what does t'bin say? The girls said the bin. He said, why don't you say that?

A dint se themselves 'cos that's not ow a speak. An language records who wi are;
language is how wi speak to each ovva. Am not someone else. Am me. Am me. An
poetry is a language of oursens, distilled.

I wanted to introduce the Language as Talisman project to Year 5 and do ethics. They said I could go in at 11. 30. When it was the time, I went in and R joined me. I did the normal thing of brainstorming what research was, and also talking through the idea of language as talisman. I asked them to think about the things they liked. They liked rap, sport, poetry, songs, bands, lots of arty things. I run out of time, and board space, and leave them with the ethics forms.

People like a lot of things. The world is a lot of things, at once, very fast. The train conductor just announced my train on the way to London is travelling at 125mph. My train on the way to London travelling at 125mph is taking me to the final day of the Poetry Parnassus, a gathering of every poet from every country competing in the Olympics. There are 204 poets in a room together. They like a lot of things. They are a lot of things. The world is more than the sum of its poets. The poets must decode the sums. Solve the algorithms of the breathing of six billion people. People who like a lot of things. Like rap and sport and poetry and songs and bands and lots of arty things. The poet distils. The poet shows back.

When I ask about that year group they say they are not very good at writing. I go into L's classroom and give her the book. The classroom is immaculate, full of words and writing. I talk to the year 6 pupils and they show me the examples of their writing on the wall. I ask them to do a score tool for the University Students. We do this at lunchtime.

As I ate lunch, the first team of University Students arrived. We all loved this team - a group of international students, from France and West Africa, who loved the children and they loved them back. However, their website was a bit muddled.

Afternoon: we spent the afternoon doing score sheets and managing the students. We were overwhelming for the 'SPLASH' team – they were by far the most confident, one of them had got a job at Microsoft and the children loved that they included games and also had a website that looked clean and very exciting. Everyone agreed it was their favourite.

I gave L the book and inscribed it and told her she was a star. R said Ofsted singled her out for praise. I said she had the knowledge about writing. I went early, in order to get to Architecture to do the Terraced House meeting. I was conscious that this was a special space and it had been a special day.

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Reflection: I have taken out some of this, as at the time they exposed me too much and the school. I have also left in some bits that didn't fit in. I don't explain why I had to text V and H then, but this was woven into the fabric of the day, which was the anniversary of the day a close friend died. I somehow had woven that into this piece of writing. I find it hard to separate out the me that lives in the everyday with the me that writes fieldnotes and is in the school.

The poet is the person who lives in the everyday, the poet is the headnotes, the poet is the thick description of each event. The poet is the lack, the inability to get across the field. They are all this at once.

However, I have taken much of what happened that day into the next phase of the research, including the critical incident with the Deputy Headteacher and his correction of the children's language. The day exists vividly in my headnotes.

Where does this leave me having presented a piece of inscribed experience? The notes above were written on the train, being half way between fieldnotes and research reflections. They are more like the situated, 'field narratives' described by Gregory *et al* (2011) in their multi site *Becoming Literate in Faith Settings* project. They embody a feeling, and also locate a project within a space.

Is poetry itself a verb? As Brian Street says, 'culture is a verb' (1993). In trying to think about the relationship between ethnography as a practice of inscription, I am also interested in poetry as a mode of ethnography.

Poetry is not a verb, certainly not an active one. It is the act of having something done to oneself, an experience which one then hopes to distil. Poetry is a noun, a proper noun as well; it is the monolith which stands at the other end of the hollow field we cannot cross. It is the thing, through the verb 'writing', through the act of writing, through ethnography, which we seek to reach. Poetry is whatever we feel without, whatever we write towards. For myself it is a connection, and inbetween me and it there is the Woolfian transience of human nature, the inability of two people to ever truly connect, the inability to truly love another person, to ever have their body completely. For other poets there are different things, racial, linguistic, socio-economic. The hole between us and the proud proper noun of Poetry is dug with different tools, it is as unplumb'd, salt and estranging for us all. Ethnographers, perhaps, observe something, write about it and the writing builds a bridge across which an epiphany is forming on the horizon; poets are not so lucky, poets are always disappointed, always a few planks short of the full bridge.

I am interested in the way in which this process of inscription is like the concept of 'culture as a verb' and how ethnography/poetry is a moment of cultural inscription (Street, 1993).

Firstly, I guess the question is why we write, why we're the only species, to our knowledge, that does. We probably never needed to for a long time, warnings and stories were passed on orally, in the small tribe we were part of, sharing stories, sat cross-legged on the ground. But we began to migrate and spread and we started using pictures to warn each other of dangers and then these pictures developed into pictorial

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languages which developed into runes which developed into alphabets, and over time, our stories were too many to remember and so we started to write them down so they might be remembered for future generations. In that sense writing, the active verb of writing is, as Kate suggests, the inscription of experience, but it is more than that, poetry, if one takes it as a verb and not the proper noun I argue for above, is about bearing witness to the world and recording that in writing; any piece of writing, epistemological, lyrical, prosodic, is the creation of a history by which we will later be studied, the creation of the texts by which we will be judged. The inscription of experience. In field notes. In thick description. In poetry.

What does poetry make visible?

Poetry makes visible what is already there but which we couldn't see for the miasma of everythingness that we have come to call the 21st century. Imagine a magic eye picture, that you stare at and you stare at until the confusion and the randomised dots and geometry begins to form a clear picture. The image is distilled into one clear message, one clear idea. Poetry is an attempt at this, an attempt to make visible one pure thing in a confused world- at least that's how I see it. Writers have had different ideas; Joyce's reaction to rampant industrialization, population increase and scientific endeavour was to create an epic which sought to incorporate everything, everything, everything, just as Whitman had before with poetry ("I am vast, I contain multitudes"). Modern poets like Geoffrey Hill see a complicated, complex world and recreate this, or seek to record it somehow, in complicated, stylised, sometimes intransigent poetry. Hill has said that fascism, in fact, often uses simple, direct language and that democracy needs as much language as possible (Hill, 2000). He could be right. But for me poetry is the taking of the vast, the multitudinous and distilling it into some pure form. Austerity is harder than abundance. It is in this way that I think the two practises, poetry, ethnography, come together. The ethnographer sits, in the school, in the home, and observes the multitudinous sounds and actions and smells and tears and shouts and recriminations and sums and meals and tries to synthesise all this into a theory, tries to make it mean something. Poetry is much the same although, rarely, is there a single project with a definite deadline. Poetry is a lifelong commitment to observation and interpretation and recording. Poetry is lifelong ethnography.

Park Conversation 4

Kate: Where does the practice cross over between activism and ethnography? Like in the AIDS crisis how do you respond?

Andrew: The AIDS crisis was a remarkable time of literature because there wasn't a language for what was happening, more so in America than over here, because...

Kate: 'Man with Night Sweats' (Gunn, 1992) which is one of our favourite things, they published that in CQ

Andrew: Man with Night Sweats, Edmund White's stuff, a lot of everything that was written in that time, you have got this homosexual culture that built itself on free love and in the early 1980's it collapsed and they don't have the language for it, and someone like Thom Gunn spends the next 20 years trying to find a language for what has happened. The only parallel is the holocaust; how to find a language for something like that.

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Kate: I have spent the last couple of nights sitting in homes in Rotherham, just before it was Ramadan, and the reason is that I feel not enough people are paying attention to certain voices in our culture, particularly British Asian girls who are a bit angry and also girls who are obsessed with writing and literature, and I feel there are not enough people in that space so I do ethnography to make those spaces visible. I can figure out where the gaps are in the culture that I can see.

The people of Rawmarsh are the experts in how they use their own language, in their dialect, in their idiolectal words for certain objects or ideas. But the linguist, the ethnographer, the studier of literature, they have the power to show these people what it is they are experts of, what it is they are doing which is quite remarkable. Because to say that something isn't worth studying because ordinary people are already experts in it does that thing a disservice, it devalues it. The language of Rawmarsh is worthy of study, is worthy of ethnography, is worthy of literature. Perhaps poetry is a way of showing this; because, as a quick aside, everyone should write poetry- in the same way that everyone should exercise whilst not necessarily running a marathon or competing in the Olympics. By showing people, in this case school children, how to distil their experiences into poetry, we are ensuring that their expertise can be put to good use. That it can be recorded. We are ensuring their generation will not be forgotten. That the tribe will continue to talk to itself, and to the outside world.

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Kate: But poetry is doing something different with voice which is aesthetic.

Andrew: it is an art form, when proper poets do it, it is an art isn't it?

“the experience of life as an everyday experience was connected through story and retold- a tale told by others” comments the article ‘life as a source of narrative’ (Hymes, 1996); poetry in many ways connects to this notion but in a slightly tangential fashion. Life retold is poetry, the trick, particularly in the work in the primary school in Rawmarsh is to give the pupils ownership over their own language and location by allowing them to retell their own story, it should not be a tale told by others. The latter breeds the idea of literature as an elitist enterprise unconnected with the lower stratum of society; a tale told by others is a tale which is not peculiar or particular to oneself- the experience of ones everyday life retold by oneself is where the real divestment of power is gained.

The article also suggests to us that the idea of storytelling was embedded in the girls through the bicameral process of lived experience and generic tropes; this in many ways is a similar process to the idea of poetry. The lived experience, the day to day observance of the reality around you and the generic tropes, the line length, the formal constraint which you might impose upon your work, the conventions which we recognise in some primal lobe of our brain as poetry. Lutkenhaus (1990) suggests a sphere of influence in ethnography which he describes as “ a relationship with the other ethnographer through the medium of notes” (p.318) this is true too of poetry, the lived experience of one ethnographer combined with the generic trope of their notes. The lived experience of one poet, through the generic trope (however experimental) of a poem is the basis for a relationship with a future poet, learning from those notes,

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that view of the world, and adapting it to their own view of the socio-psychogeography of lived experience.

Transience. By which, in truth, one is really moving towards the idea that love always misses love, that two people might meet momentarily but there is a real inability for two people to permanently and fully know each other. Love always misses love. Lack. Loss. Transience. Consider what Rosaldo (1986) writes in 'From the Door of his Tent' that a historian will dwell on "what the villagers...lack", will write "depicting through empty negatives rather than positive features" (p.85); Rosaldo theorises that this is an idea which "appears frequently in ethnographic discourse" the highlighting of "absences". It appears in poetry too, for reasons already proposed earlier in this article. Each poet will have a different preoccupation; mine is that of transience, through "highlighting absences" (p.85), through highlighting the inability of poetry to ever truly say what it wants to say. Consider Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1964); the conversation just before the start of 'Time Passes'; the couple's diverging conversational points keep missing each other. "It was only that she never could say what she felt" (p.142). The poet can never truly write what is felt. The ethnographer can never truly condense into words what is observed. Only the highlighting of absences. "The empty places" Woolf writes, "such were some of the parts, but how to bring them together" (p.167). The empty places. Some of the parts. Empty places as the sum of the parts. Empty places as the whole. The highlighting of absence. Poetry. Ethnography. The attempt to bring them together.

This is how it ends, then; if by end we mean the perpetual moment of unending which is as far from the start as we are ever likely to get. If that is what we mean then this is how it ends; out in the middle of the ocean. In a vessel (on a page) which is not big enough to contain us. Beyond them is an island, Malinowski (1922) is still sitting on it, still sitting in the first and only truly unconscious and pure piece of ethnographic research. Each subsequent research is a reach out to that island, a fjording of the waters that break across it in an attempt to arrive at that ideal of ethnographic study. The ethnographer sits in the boat, the island is smudged on the horizon; it does not grow closer. The poet is in the boat too, the poet is on the same journey, the same unreachable smudge in the distance, the same propensity towards a shore that the waves (the boat) (the page) may never reach. And this is where it ends, in an unending, a non-ending. Each ethnographic project as an attempt to return to the purity of Malinowski; each poem an attempt to reach what it is that truly wants to be said. Behind, the water travelled by those who have gone before, the previous generations. Ahead, the unreachable, the *thing*, the distilled notion towards which we strive. And here, here in the unending non-ending journey we end with the poet, the ethnographer, the shared page, the unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea (Arnold, n.d).

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