

Telling stories, screening lives: notes towards an anthropological biography

Anthropological work that focuses on individual lives, what Zeitlyn calls a ‘sample of one’ (Zeitlyn, 2008, *Social Anthropology*, 16, 154), has long hovered on the edge of disciplinary respectability. At best it is viewed as a fieldwork methodology, a way of collecting data; at worst, a kind of popularisation. **This essay is a response to an emerging interest in anthropological biography.** Drawing on the rich history of innovative work with individuals, it presents an argument for taking seriously ‘person-centered ethnography’ (Langness and Frank 1981). Through a juxtaposition of classic texts and films, the paper articulates a case for recognising person-centred ethnography as an unusually generative anthropological form, offering a critical context for the development of contemporary practice. Finally, in seeking to distinguish what might constitute anthropological biography as a particular mode of inquiry, I propose a realignment of the life-writing project with **humanistically oriented work in biographical studies.**

Key words biography, ethnographic film, subjectivity, experimental life-writing

Introduction

The genre of biography enjoys broad popularity today. From established historical, political and artistic figures to contemporary celebrities, there is enormous interest in the lives of people. Nevertheless, biography hovers uncertainly at the edges of academic respectability. For some biographers, **this marginal status offers advantages**, not least because **it frees work from disciplinary strictures and conventions.** For others, the refusal to accord the genre proper academic standing is to deny the possibility of critical dialogue around questions of narrative, subjectivity and textual form (Holmes 2002; Lee 2009).

Ambivalence about biography is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the field of anthropology. ‘Biography is anything but innocent’, the Comaroffs (1992: 25) once declared. In their view, it was an endeavour hopelessly compromised. For the Comaroffs, the genre emerged and was profoundly shaped by 18th-century ideas about **‘bourgeois personhood’** (1992: 26). As a narrative form, it presented lives as being comprised of orderly, self-directed individual actions. By working uncritically with the notion of biography or life history (or autobiography), **anthropologists, the Comaroffs warned, were in danger of imposing a historically and culturally specific model of the individual onto lives unlike their own.**

But if anthropologists have until recently shied away from using the term ‘biography’, there has nonetheless been a longstanding interest in the representation of individual subjects. Classic texts include Mintz’s *Worker in the cane* (1960), Shostak’s *Nisa* (1981) and Behar’s *Translated woman* (1993). Work of this sort is, however, **usually referred to as ‘life-writing’.** Although biography and life-writing are synonymous, the **terms have increasingly designated different kinds of projects.** Biography tends to be

seen as a branch of history and literature, while life writing is more closely associated with feminism, cultural studies and literary theory (Renders et al. 2017). The former is suggestive of an older enterprise – classic stories of male heroes. The latter is identified with the recuperation of ‘other’ lives, most notably people excluded from established narratives on grounds of race, class and gender.

Until recently, the distinction between biography and life-writing was clearly expressed within anthropology. Biography was almost exclusively reserved for texts that focused on the discipline’s founders and major figures – Malinowski or Levi Strauss, for instance (Young 2004; Wilcken 2010). Life writing, by contrast, referred to accounts of anthropology’s ‘traditional’ subjects. As a broad and amorphous category of work, it encompassed life histories, life stories, life narratives, memoir, auto-ethnography, native autobiography.¹ At particular moments in anthropology’s history, interest in life writing has emerged as a focus for lively debate – most notably in the 1980s, following the publication of Crapanzano’s *Tuhami* (1980) and Shostak’s *Nisa*. But such moments tend to be short lived. The status of life-writing within the discipline is unstable, not least because of the association of this work with popularisation and general readerships. For many anthropologists, it is often not clear what focusing on the life of an individual offers, conceptually or theoretically, to the discipline. If deemed to have value for professional anthropology, it tends to be presented in methodological terms (Langness 1965; Langness and Frank 1981) – that is, life-writing as a potential fieldwork strategy that yields insight into broader questions about how cultural and historical forces impact the lives of individuals.

Within contemporary anthropology there is evidence of a renewed interest in particular lives – from Biehl’s moving account of his work with Catarina in *Vita* (Biehl and Eskerod 2005) to Zeitlyn (2008), Niehaus (2012) and Smith and Mwadime (2014). Perhaps most surprising is the dedication of an entire issue of *Social Anthropology to Biography* in 2018, with the choice of term signalling a distinction between current concerns and the older genre of life-writing. Building on Beatty’s recent call for ‘ethnographic biography’ (2018: 32), a primary objective here is to revisit work that focuses on individuals and to assess how it might contribute to the development of *biography* as a particular mode of inquiry. Taking seriously what has often been scanted by the discipline reveals an unusually creative anthropological genre. Moreover, it is the indispensable ground for new biographically oriented work in the discipline.

I begin by exploring different approaches toward the representation of individual lives. Specifically, I argue that the juxtaposition of anthropological work pursued through film and text offers an expansive context for emerging interest in biography. It allows for a more nuanced understanding of how, as anthropologists, we might approach lives understood in their full complexity – as embodied states of being as much as discursive constructions. Hitherto old disciplinary divisions have inhibited the exchange of anthropologies pursued in different media. But there is much to be gained by exploring how analytical perspectives distinctive to text and to film might be brought into productive dialogue.

¹ Although some texts include images, they are usually included for illustrative purposes rather than as a counter-narrative or as ‘another way of telling’ (Berger and Mohr 1982). An exception is Biehl and Eskerod (2005).

My interest in the creative possibilities of anthropological biography grows out of a long-term filmmaking project I have developed in Machiasport, Maine.² Working closely with certain individuals – not as representative of something or as parts of a study about something – I have been interested in exploring who they are at a particular moment in their life. One of the main problems I encountered was how to move beyond documenting the external contours and trajectory of a life to approach and evoke more elusive aspects of character. In this task, I found myself drawn more to models from literary biography than anthropological life-writing. For although I sought to remain attentive to context, I was equally fascinated by the puzzle of individual temperament, motivation, interiority – and by the challenge of how to render such qualities through the medium of film.³

Describing my work as *anthropological biography* made it difficult to place. On the one hand, given no such category existed within the field of ethnographic film (though many films might be considered part of such a genre), there was no established critical discourse with which to engage. On the other hand, within mainstream anthropology, there was the amorphous category of ‘life-writing’ which, as its name indicates, consisted solely of textual models. In recognising that I was working with film as a medium of inquiry (harnessing of image, sound, movement to a process of investigation), I wanted to find out what might be distinctive about using an ‘image-and-sequence’ rather than a ‘word-and-sentence’ approach in exploring individual subjectivity (MacDougall 1998: 68). What examples from the tradition of ethnographic film might I draw on and how might these serve to broaden anthropological thinking about individual lives?

Over the last three decades or so, conceptual and methodological changes in the discipline have brought human subjectivity into new focus. From Abu-Lughod’s advocacy of ‘writing against culture’ (1991) to the emergence of phenomenological and sensory perspectives (Csordas 1990; Jackson 1989; Stoller 1997), anthropology’s long-established theoretical frameworks and its central structuring principle – culture itself – have been subject to sustained challenge. No longer approached as a simple cipher for cultural forms, recent work has addressed the complex ways that human subjects are enmeshed in the lifeworld. This reorientation raises questions about how to explore

² Films include: Four part series entitled *Mr Coperthwaite: a life in the Maine Woods* (2013, *Spring in Dickinson’s Reach, A Summer Task, Autumn’s Work, Winter Days*), *At Low Tide* (2016) and *George’s Place: the cellar* (2018). Distributed by the Royal Anthropological Institute.

³ Of course, these concerns could be seen as a personal idiosyncrasy and, for many within the discipline, they would not be considered legitimate areas for enquiry but instead the preserve of the novelist, literary biographer or creative writer. Beatty raises a similar problem in his discussion of emotion. Writing about the limitations of existing work, he observes: ‘What is needed ... is a form of writing that captures dimensions of life too often left to fiction, parceled out among experts in other fields, or left out of account altogether: something like that narrative and imaginative engagement that enables the historian to make the past present’ (Beatty 2019). See also Narayan (2012). But there are two additional questions here. The first relates to the distinctiveness of film as a medium through which human subjectivity is explored. As a filmmaker, one’s anthropological sensibility is attuned in very distinctive ways. Film is relentlessly specific, dense in detail (indeed ‘excessive’), and evokes the corporeal, sensory and affective textures of human experience. Hence the filmmaker’s attention is oriented differently than that of the writer and different questions about individual lives come into view. The second question, which Beatty’s approach also implies, relates to where one situates oneself as anthropologist between the social sciences or the humanities. The differences between these alignments – conceptual, epistemological and ethical – are profound.

and render the ways that lives take shape within a continually unfolding world (Ingold 2011; Jackson 2012).

Anthropology and life-writing

I knew better than she did [Marjorie Shostak] that anthropological life-histories were not a compelling genre. They tended to be either wooden recitations of ethnographic facts organized biographically or tendentiously, theoretically driven psychological studies. (Konner 2011: 73)

Despite the popularity of a few anthropological life histories such as Lee Simmons's *Sun Chief* (1942) and Oscar Lewis's *Children of Sanchez* (1961), the life history has been somewhat of a conceptual – and an emotional – embarrassment to academic anthropology and has remained on the periphery of the discipline. (Crapanzano 1984: 954)

The beginning of anthropological life-writing is usually traced to Radin's work – specifically *The autobiography of a Winnebago Indian* (1920), the life story of Sam Blowsnake (S.B.). In his introduction, Radin explained his motivation: 'One of the greatest drawbacks in the study of primitive peoples is the difficulty, one might almost say the impossibility, of **obtaining an inside view of their culture from their own lips and by their own initiative**. A native informant is, at best, interested merely in satisfying the demands of the investigator' (1920: 1). But he goes on to acknowledge the lack of what he calls 'atmosphere' in ethnographic description. For Radin, only 'direct expression' from a native subject can provide proper description of cultural life, suggesting that 'personal reminiscences and impressions', though inadequate, offer more insight into 'the workings of the mind and emotions of primitive man than any amount of speculation from a sophisticated ethnologist or ethnological theorist' (1920: 1–2).

In the 1920 publication, S.B.'s autobiography is presented as the central element in the text. Surrounding it stands a range of secondary materials – Radin's introduction, his footnotes and an additional section that serves as a kind of appendix, also by S.B., entitled 'My Father's Teachings'. According to Radin, the life story or autobiography was written by S.B. in two sessions ('no attempt of any kind was made to influence him in the selection of the particular facts which he chose to present'; 1920: 2) and, presented chronologically, Radin arranges the narrative as a series of short sections, beginning with S.B.'s early years, moving through marriage, difficulties and setbacks, imprisonment, visionary experiences, to, finally, Christian conversion.

The organisation and layout of the text is revealing. As noted above, Radin prefaces the autobiography with a short introduction that provides the broad context for its presentation and the means by which it was obtained. Then, as the story itself unfolds, Radin's interventions are manifest in the numerous footnotes that stand at the bottom of each page (1999 [1926]). In fact, as Krupat points out (1999: xii), there are 351 footnotes in the book – indicative of the importance Radin attributes to supplementing and contextualising the cultural details, experiences, events and relationships that S.B. describes in his narrative.

Radin's text stands as a model for later life-writing in anthropology. At the centre is an individual's self-presentation (what Radin calls 'autobiography'), a life story organised chronologically. Accompanying it are contextual materials and interventions by the anthropologist. The latter provide an introduction and interpretive framework for the narrative that follows. Some 30 years after Radin's publication, there was a small resurgence of anthropological interest in life-writing. Mary Smith published *Baba of Karo* (1981 [1954]), which was followed by Sidney Mintz's *Worker in the cane* (1960) and Oscar Lewis's *The children of Sanchez* (1961). Although these texts do not follow exactly the layout used in Radin's classic 1920 work, they nevertheless contain the same elements and are organised according to the framework established by *The autobiography*. Radin's innovative textual presentation – **positioning his own active voice on the same page as his subject's, such that it reads as a kind of open dialogue** – is replaced in later texts by an absence of footnotes or their removal to the back of the book. As compensation, Smith, Mintz and Lewis provide more extended introductions to the presented life stories as a way of giving the reader contextual details and an account of how the work was done.⁴

Although these mid-century texts are widely admired as classics of anthropological literature, they are not considered major works in the development of the discipline. Given the structural functional orientation of Anglo-American anthropology and commitment to Durkheimian notions of culture, this is perhaps not surprising. **Individuals have tended to be seen as cultural composites and of limited interest except in terms of broader structures.** During the 1980s, this began to change as part of other disciplinary developments (Clifford and Marcus 1986). At the same time, life-writing was given new focus with the publication of **Vincent Crapanzano's *Tuhami* (1980) and Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa* (1981)**. If the former sparked a good deal of professional interest by its unusual, experimental form; the latter was widely reviewed by major newspapers of the day and engaged a broad, public readership.⁵ The success of *Nisa* reflected the growing strength of the women's movement, serving also to remind anthropologists that the lives and experiences of women had long been overlooked within the discipline. Unlike Crapanzano's text, however, *Nisa* broke no new ground in terms of its techniques, hewing closely to the well-established model pioneered by Radin.

By contrast, Crapanzano explicitly eschewed the conventions of anthropological life-writing – namely the contextualisation and presentation of a 'native' autobiography. Instead he placed his encounter with Tuhami at the heart of the work. Declaring the text an "experiment" Crapanzano (1980: ix) presented a radically different framework by which to explore and represent an individual life. Consequently, the organisation

⁴ Smith's presentation of Baba's autobiography is for the contemporary reader a most curious text. In the original edition, the book opens with an introduction by Smith's husband, the 'professional' anthropologist, MG Smith. He explains: 'The following autobiography was recorded by my wife in Hausa, as far as possible verbatim, during a period of six weeks ...'. For the next almost 80 pages, Smith goes on to provide his context for his wife's and Baba's work. At page 87, Baba finally speaks. In many ways, Mintz follows Smith in his organisation of the text, *Worker in the cane*. We find here, too, a central story – the life of the Puerto Rican farm worker Taso, as told to the anthropologist. It is framed by Mintz's long and detailed introduction and concluded with his Epilogue. In places, Mintz includes his questions as interventions into Taso's story, as he seeks clarifications and amplification of certain points. Although Lewis's work is contextualised autobiography, its innovative quality derives from the juxtaposition of life stories from different family members.

⁵ See Di Leonardo (2000).

of the book departed significantly from Radin's template. In place of different sections that reflected successive life-stages, Crapanzano offered a handful of extended chapters that alternate between dialogues with Tuhami and ongoing reflections on the research process. By shifting decisively away from the role of anthropologist as facilitator of, or conduit for, a self-standing autobiographical account, Crapanzano made clear that the subject's self-presentation did not exist independently of the encounter with the anthropologist. Indeed, he goes further in recognising his own role in the shaping of a particular subjectivity, casting the unfolding dialogue between himself and Tuhami as something that resembled a western therapeutic relationship.

Crapanzano's approach in *Tuhami* followed an earlier exercise pursued with a single subject and published as *The fifth world of Enoch Maloney* (1969). Here, too, the relationship between the anthropologist and Maloney forms the book's structuring narrative. In both cases, Crapanzano used the term 'portrait' in the books' subtitles, revealing his conceptualisation of the task – one analogous to the emblematic case of a painter and subject. He makes manifest the centrality of his role in the creation and interpretation of a life. To offer a portrait, not an autobiography, a life story or life history, Crapanzano abandons the model of anthropological life-writing as about the presentation of a self-standing story or narrative that extends through time. In its place, he proposes a very different kind of temporality forged in a contemporary moment of encounter. If Crapanzano emerges from the shadows of the text, so to speak, some critics have suggested that it is less a progressive move and more of a strategy for making himself the focus of the representation at the expense of the subject (Bumble 2008). This is a question raised with respect to Ruth Behar (1993), an anthropologist especially identified with life-writing as a contemporary approach within the discipline.

Behar's book, *Translated woman* (1993), is in some ways a synthesis of the established model of anthropological life-writing and the approach represented by Crapanzano. It is both narrative and portrait, a chronological life story and the representation of an encounter. On the one hand, Behar presents Esperanza's autobiography, acknowledging it to be a highly crafted story; on the other, she makes their relationship a central part of the work. Not only does she chart the changing dynamics between herself and Esperanza, but Behar intervenes in numerous other ways in the text – from an extensive use of epigraphs and introductions to the different parts of Esperanza's story, to the entire third part of the book that includes the much-debated 'The biography in the shadow'. It is hard not to feel that Behar, like Crapanzano, cannot relinquish the traditional trappings of authorship and she, rather than Esperanza, **threatens to become the work's dominant presence.** Unlike Crapanzano, the central question of subjectivity remains untouched. Despite the braiding of different voices, *Translated woman* presents two complementary self-standing narratives – Esperanza's and Behar's – linked by means of a retrospective account of their production.

What the approaches of Crapanzano and Behar underline is the experimental breadth of anthropological work that engages individual lives. Although often overlooked or perceived as somewhat ad hoc interventions rather than an expansive field of enquiry, the innovations that have followed from a radical shift of perspective from generalities to particularities, abstract concepts to actual lives, offer important models for contemporary practice. Attending carefully to questions of textual form, not as something fixed but generative, establishes ground for a critical apprehension of how individual lives have been conceptualised within the discipline. But it is only one part of the story.

Ethnographic film and individual lives

Anthropological work with individual lives (as autobiography, life story, life history, portrait, biography) has been conducted almost exclusively through interview, dialogue and conversation – later transcribed into textual form. But is there more to a life than can be *said* about it? **How might work in the medium of film challenge these models and evoke aspects of subjectivity not satisfactorily encompassed by language?** By looking closely at selected examples, I suggest they allow us to think about subjectivity in more expansive, corporeal terms. They also point to an ambitious, open-ended inquiry into subjectivity that in important ways exceeds the textual innovations of anthropological life-writing.

Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) stands as an important point of departure. It has long stood as a model (positively and negatively) for filmmakers committed to working closely with particular individuals. Some two years after Radin published *The autobiography*, Flaherty released his classic film. It captured the popular imagination, enjoying unprecedented commercial success with audiences in Europe and North America. **For the first time, the life of a native subject was the focus of cinematic attention.** For this reason alone *Nanook* has enduring significance. Flaherty's exploration of character was also distinctive. His approach as a filmmaker represented an attempt to move beyond merely documenting the external aspects of culture. Instead, using particular camera and editing techniques, Flaherty sought to open up an interior or imaginative space around his central subject. As MacDougall puts it: 'It [*Nanook of the North*] demonstrated ... an entirely new use for film – not merely a record of activities, nor an instructional tool, but **a doorway one could step through imaginatively into the life of another people**' (MacDougall 2006).⁶

Made before the coming of sound in cinema, Flaherty's unusually intimate portrayal of an Inuit man, 'Nanook' (played by Allakariallak, a long-term collaborator of the filmmaker), comprised extended observational scenes and textual interventions in the form of intertitles. According to some commentators (Huhndorf 2000), Flaherty's depiction of *Nanook's* central character is narrow and stereotypical. For these critics, the filmmaker presents his subject as simple, childlike and primitive and, as such, consistent with an established history of western images of the Eskimo. But far from countering what is understood to be Flaherty's denial of agency to his Inuit subject, it can be argued that the critics themselves collude in such a denial, refusing to acknowledge the possibility of Allakariallak's skilful, self-conscious crafting of a particular persona for the film (Grimshaw 2013).

Flaherty's exploration of character is more interesting and complex than many commentators would have us believe. The fact that the film remains such a focus of debate, almost a century after its release, is surely an indication of the unresolved questions about its central figure. *Nanook* exceeds whatever interpretive frame is placed around him – including the filmmaker's. A first step in recognising this excess is understanding the relationship of text and image in the film. It is not one of correspondence – textual description and illustration. Instead the relationship is a dynamic interplay

⁶ In relation to the failure of his early Inuit work, Flaherty said: 'I had learned to explore, I had not learned to reveal' (quoted in Flaherty 1972: 13).

between linguistic propositions and visual evidence, in which the latter serves to continually raise questions and challenge the former.

Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* is in some ways **the filmic counterpart to Radin's *Autobiography***. There is a shared commitment not to explain or speak about a native subject but rather to work collaboratively with him in the articulation of a representation. But, unlike Radin's subject, Nanook's life story is not conceptualised as something autonomous, recounted, recorded and contextualised by the filmmaker. In foregrounding the *performative* nature of the encounter between filmmaker and subject, Flaherty's film reminds us that stories about individual lives are not straightforwardly 'found' but are created in and through relationships – and, crucially, **they are theatrical, involving performances of the self**.

If Radin provided an important model for much life-writing in anthropology – what might be called the contextualised autobiography – Flaherty's film has been influential in a different way. *Nanook of the North* did not establish a template for subsequent work, but it pointed to some of the qualities that make the medium of film distinctive in the exploration of individual lives. For, although it is common to talk of 'reading' a film, this fails to describe **the centrality of corporeality to the viewing experience**.

The continuing debate about Nanook and who he (really) is reflects the openness of an image-based form. Specifically, it throws into focus the way that the film's subject eludes or exceeds the work's interpretive frame, revealing a space between what MacDougall (2006) calls 'being' and 'meaning': 'When we look, we are doing something more deliberate than seeing and yet more unguarded than thinking. We are putting ourselves in a sensory state that is at once one of vacancy and of heightened awareness. Our imitative faculties take precedence over judgment and categorization, preparing us for a different kind of knowledge' (MacDougall 2006: 7). The cinematic techniques that distinguish *Nanook of the North* – the extended sequences, the construction of scenes around moments of discovery, the tactility and affective texture of the images, the emphasis on showing not telling – invite an experientially based response from the viewer. It is not organised according to discursive expectations but hinges on an imaginative and exploratory response generated by relationships of association and resonance. Understood in this way, a film's structure is aligned not with argument but instead with poetic form.⁷

Some 30 years later, Jean Rouch (an anthropologist always quick to acknowledge his debt to Flaherty) experimented with the film medium in his engagement with individual lives. His films with West African migrants proposed new anthropological conceptions of subjectivity. Drawing on Flaherty's practice of collaboration and acknowledgement of the centrality of performance in self-presentations, Rouch's 1958 film *Moi, un noir*, is an important example of his approach. It both challenged static anthropological generalisations about African subjects and subverted disciplinary expectations about the veracity of life stories.⁸

⁷ This confusion is often at the root of anthropology's puzzlement as to what to do with films and how to evaluate them (MacDougall 2006).

⁸ Feld's (2003) edited volume is an indispensable source on Rouch and the anthropological significance of his work.

Rouch's film, made in Treichville, a migrant quarter of Cote D'Ivoire's capital, Abidjan, tells the story of Edward G. Robinson (Oumarou Ganda), a migrant from Niamey who works as a day labourer in the port. Over the course of a week, Robinson presents a narrative of his life, contrasting his marginality as a day labourer with the freedom of Saturday and community of Sunday. But *Moi, un noir* is no straightforward autobiography. Robinson's life story is self-consciously crafted and shaped in collaboration with his Treichville friends, Eddie Constantine, Dorothy Lamour, Tarzan and Rouch himself. As the names indicate, fantasy and imagined identities are inseparable from the 'real' ones.

Moi, un noir is notable for many reasons, not least because for the first time an African subject was the central character of a film. Shot silently, with a soundtrack added later, Rouch made the theatrical, improvised nature of the life story the central dynamic of the work. Indeed he is an active participant in its creation, expressed in his mobile, vibrant camera work and the picaresque narrative through which Robinson's story is told. Although Rouch's verbal interventions, placed around the edges of the work, resemble in some ways the 'anthropological' voice in Mintz or Shostak, the filmmaker does not supply conventional information about his subject. He inserts pieces of poetic commentary. Interwoven with Rouch's voice are the film's other voices combined to create *Moi, un noir*'s unusual soundtrack. After completing the editing, Rouch invited Robinson and his friends to improvise a commentary, recorded while they watched themselves on film. In this way, Rouch added another layer of complexity to the work, drawing attention to the creative ways that lives and stories are continually being made and re-made. The film's central character, Edward G. Robinson, is a subject in movement. His life cannot be encompassed within a fixed or retrospective narrative. As Rouch makes evident, it is oriented toward a future and constituted through a complex, ongoing practice, taking its shape in and through particular relationships. It shifts and changes with each instance of telling.

Rouch's filmmaking techniques in *Moi, un noir* express this distinctive interpretation of subjectivity. The camera is not used straightforwardly to portray or document an individual life. Rouch conceives of the camera as a transformative instrument, a catalyst for the invention of new selves or subjectivities; and, as such, he eschews many of the conventions of anthropological life-writing to embrace unashamedly the performative and fantastical dimensions of character. For Rouch, the camera facilitates the construction of life stories, not as something stable or pre-existent but as a generative or improvisatory form. Using the term 'ethnofiction' to describe his approach, he suggests entirely novel forms of selfhood that do not exist prior to their invention and cannot be contained or expressed within traditional frameworks or narrative structures. Moreover, in Rouch's hands, cinema itself is approached as a site of transformation, bringing together filmmaker, subjects and, crucially, audiences in a charged encounter that has the potential to catalyse new conceptions of subjectivity.

A decade or so after *Moi, un noir*, Jorge Prelorán completed *Imaginerio* (1970) a portrait of Hermógenes Cayo, an image maker, living high on the Argentinian plateau. The film presents the life of a self-taught folk artist, whose intricate work as a wood carver and painter was inspired by his profound religious devotion. For Prelorán, *Imaginerio* was part of an extended project of work that focused on particular individuals. In decisively shifting his attention as a filmmaker from anthropological topics toward an intimate engagement with lives, he called these films 'ethnobiographies'

(1987).⁹ Prelorán followed what he called a ‘subjective’ approach, proceeding ‘intuitively rather than methodologically’ (1987: 466), allowing the distinctive aesthetic contours of his work to be an integral part of his interpretation of character. This is particularly striking in the case of *Imaginerio*. For the film is not ‘about’ Cayo’s life in any direct way as one reviewer pointed out (Carter 1971). Instead Prelorán draws on the distinctive qualities of film – image, audio, editing – to create a work that in its very structure and aesthetic organisation expresses an understanding of Cayo’s artistic personality.

Imaginerio is both an interpretation of a singular life on film and a *filmic interpretation* of an artistic personality. It is articulated through Prelorán’s unusual angles, compositions and framings, through the careful interplay of landscape and subjects, the use of light and shadow, still and moving images and, not least, in the complex sound track that accompanies the images – layers of sound that encompass Cayo’s voice, his wife’s voice, Prelorán’s English translation, along with other sounds (children’s voices, the wind, sounds carnival, music and silence). Not least, Prelorán eschews the chronological conventions of anthropological life stories. He begins the film in the middle of his subject’s life, before moving back in time and completing the work after Cayo’s death. There is no straightforward linear trajectory and there is no satisfying closure. Eschewing the conventions of anthropological contextualisation or explanation, Prelorán poses a more difficult question about what constitutes a life.

Finally, David and Judith MacDougall’s *Lorang’s way* offers yet another anthropological approach toward working with particular individuals. Made in 1973–4, their film poses a simple question – who is Lorang? As with the other filmmakers discussed above, the MacDougalls’ concern is neither to assemble a chronological narrative of a person’s life nor to serve as a facilitator of Lorang’s autobiography. Instead they establish the contours of an inquiry into a Turkana man – his character, his place in the world, his relationships with others, his past experiences and so on. It is an open-ended exploration assembled from different sorts of evidence – what particular people say about Lorang, what Lorang says about himself, questions from the filmmakers, Lorang observed in different situations with his wives, sons and children, with other Turkana elders and so on. The MacDougalls use strategies of distanciation such that the viewer is always conscious that they are watching a film and being presented with a range of materials from which to fashion an interpretation of Lorang. In this way, the filmmakers refuse to align straightforwardly their audience with Lorang. They make us aware that this is an investigation comprising questions, propositions and observations. The MacDougalls have their own interpretation, of course, articulated through how and what is chosen to be filmed. Nevertheless, the film remains open, allowing viewers to weigh, carefully, the available evidence and explore their own responses to its central subject.

In *Lorang’s way*, the particular nature of the MacDougalls’ inquiry is expressed through their filmmaking techniques, but these do not exist independently of an interpretive perspective toward their subject. Lorang’s life story is not poured into a pre-existing model or organised according to chronology. It is shaped through the relationships that constitute the film. The MacDougalls build their work from short,

⁹ It included *Cochengo Miranda* (1974), *Zerda’s children* (1978) and *Zulay: facing the twenty first century* (1989). For a discussion of Prelorán’s ‘biographical’ orientation within the context of his broader approach, see Sherman (1985).

self-contained sequences interspersed with text that chart an episodic investigation. The discrete segments or components map a range of interpretive possibilities. They are carefully juxtaposed to raise questions about what is said and what is observed, what can be understood through language and through image and sound. In these ways, the MacDougalls foreground the complexity of the task. In particular, their techniques reveal an approach toward Lorang that does not conceptualise an individual life as unfolding according to a linear path. The representation offered by the filmmakers invites us to evaluate critically how Lorang sees and understands himself, and to test his constructed self against other evidence that comprises his world.

Towards anthropological biography

The life history is more ‘literary’ than ‘scientific’ – and yet more ‘scientific’ than ‘literary.’ It mediates, not too successfully, the tension between the intimate field experience and the essentially impersonal process of anthropological analysis and ethnographic presentation. The commentary attached to it can be saccharine in its sentimentality and overambitious in its justification. (Crapanzano 1984: 954)

Not parallel but tangential: biography fits awkwardly with ethnography, doing well what ethnography does well to avoid. (Beatty 2018: 30)

In this essay, I have highlighted different anthropological approaches to the exploration and representation of individual lives. One of my intentions has been to establish the contours of existing work as a basis for newly emerging practice. Mindful of earlier surveys by Langness and Frank (1981) along with more recent essays by Zeitlyn (2008) and Beatty (2018), I have sought to extend the boundaries of what is usually known as ‘life-writing’, bringing examples from the tradition of ethnographic film into dialogue with textual forms. Moving beyond an exclusive linguistic bias, I have suggested that not only does work in the medium of film introduce new dimensions of human subjectivity into the existing models (foregrounding the experiential, sensory, imaginative and corporeal dimensions of being) but it significantly expands the range of anthropological models with respect to individual lives. Such an exercise reveals the rich history of this kind of work. It offers a critical context for contemporary practice. In particular, it makes clear that explorations of individual lives (whatever the disciplinary preconceptions) comprise an unusually fertile anthropological form. Like their literary counterparts, anthropological filmmakers have experimented with a range of techniques in response to the distinctive personalities of those individuals with whom they work and, as such, they have offered new ways of thinking about subjectivity, including their own.¹⁰

Lives are ‘made’, not found. It is this acknowledgement that has been such a creative impulse in anthropological work focused around particular individuals. As my

¹⁰ Films discussed here challenge the terms of existing debates about authorship in life-writing. As examples of what MacDougall has called ‘deep’ rather than ‘external’ reflexivity (1998: 85–91), they suggest ways of thinking in more subtle and nuanced ways about the different subjectivities at work in person-centred ethnography.

examples reveal, there has been a sustained engagement with the problem of subjectivity and with the challenges of how to move beyond external aspects of a life to embrace the complex and imaginative dimensions of personhood. The experimental quality of the work is not, however, something self-consciously designed. It is a response on the part of the anthropologists to the unique lives of their subjects. At the same time, it expresses the complex intertwining of subjectivities emerging through the encounter between anthropologist and subject.

Hitherto anthropologists have used terms such as life history, life story, biography, auto-ethnography, autobiography, portrait somewhat loosely or interchangeably to describe work that engages individual lives. While distinctions are not hard and fast, it is also important to recognise significant differences in the modes of inquiry and knowledge forms that constitute person-centred ethnography. For example, although life history is built on the collaboration of anthropologist and subject, the encounter is neither – as in the case of a portrait – the primary focus of the inquiry nor explicitly foregrounded in the final representation. In pursuing a life history, the objective is to chart the temporal arc of a life, how it unfolds over time and elicit, organise and understand another's narrated trajectory by means of a chronological framework. Such an endeavour might also be called a contextualised autobiography, since it is a story of a life taken at face value, so to speak, and given meaning through the interventions of an outside perspective. By contrast, a portrait has no temporal extension but is primarily a representation of an encounter between anthropologist and subject. At its core is a dynamic forging of subjectivities. It is not predicated on an interweaving of self-standing life stories or contextualised autobiography, but it involves the creation of a hybrid narrative generated at a particular moment in time. Such an approach does not offer perspectives outside of the encounter nor is there a concern with charting an extended chronology of life trajectories.

In proposing 'biography' as a distinctive mode of anthropological inquiry, I seek to reclaim the term from the reductionism of the Comaroffs and link it, crucially, to a broader field of literary studies. In so doing, I propose a realignment of the project away from social science conventions, asking: how might humanistically oriented interpretive perspectives facilitate more productive engagement with individual lives and offer new ways of thinking about anthropological biography?

For Woolf, the problem of biography was the need to use what she called 'devices of fiction' to communicate 'personality'. In her eyes, the latter implied a kind of truth incompatible with the 'truth of real life' (2008: 99), though as contemporary Wittgenstein biographer, Monk, has suggested, this is a false opposition. It follows from Woolf's conception of fiction as the only way to move beyond documentation of the external world to access 'life' (2007: 541). In revisiting early models of biography represented by Boswell and Johnson, Monk argues for the creative fusion of 'granite' and 'rainbow' through the articulation of an interpretive stance by the author with respect to their subject – one predicated on a particular kind of hermeneutic. For Monk, what Wittgenstein called 'the kind of understanding that consists in seeing connections' offers a framework for grasping the peculiar nature of the biographical task (2007: 567). Approached as a practice of description, rather than explanation, the biographer seeks not to argue but to persuade a reader to see a subject in a particular way.

In a largely overlooked essay from 1980, the anthropologist Kenneth Little highlighted problems with the way individual lives were studied within the discipline. He noted that life histories were motivated by concerns with broader cultural phenomena

and not primarily by an interest in a particular individual. Moreover, he argued that work with individuals tended to be viewed as straightforwardly descriptive and, as such, preliminary. Further analytical attention was deemed necessary to render it useful to anthropology (1980: 216). Returning to the early example of Radin, however, Little articulates a case for anthropology's reengagement with humanistic principles as the foundation for taking *individuals as individuals* seriously. It is the sort of understanding that is achieved through 'comprehension', not 'explanation' (1980: 217). Little highlights essential qualities of insight and acquaintance as constitutive of 'imaginative description', writing: '[T]he foundation of this kind of understanding is an aesthetic hermeneutics. The elements of this foundation are an insight, acquaintance and mediation between writer and the native person being described. It is through this kind of understanding that the life history work becomes a work of imaginative description' (1980: 222). Imagination is crucial then to the interpretive dynamic of biographical work. The latter is, as Little emphasises, a demanding practice, involving:


a critical self-reflection, an inner positioning and recognition of one's self as a living person, and an insight into the knowledge self-reflection brings to the understanding of another life. Accordingly, the writer cannot stand apart from himself/herself to study the reified mind and matter of another's life. For such a step replaces empathy with object, insight with method, imagination with conceptualization and comprehension with explanation. The writer then may be able to formulate a conceptual model; and thereby gain an operating, perhaps even manipulative, knowledge of the other's life but will not be able to understand the life from within. (1980: 224)

I began by noting ambivalence in the academy about biography. The genre is often seen as popularising, whimsical and impressionistic rather than scholarly and theoretical. Following the semiotic turn, scholars (including anthropologists) largely turned away from questions of authorship and human subjectivity. Hence there was no secure conceptual basis for biographical work in many academic fields. Furthermore, in the case of anthropology, there was an assumption that biography was a static genre of limited cross-cultural use. But this was to ignore the overwhelming literary evidence to the contrary and, significantly, to overlook the flexible ways that have been used to engage individual lives within the discipline itself (Arnold and Blackburn 2004).

Anthropology has long manifested anxieties about the exploration and representation of individual lives. But, increasingly, analytical focus on structures and fixed overarching notions of society or culture have given way to concern with process, with practice, subjectivities and relationality. Here, I suggest, anthropological biography can find a new place. Individuals are no longer seen in terms of representativeness, fitting into some imagined collectivity, nor are they simplistically conceptualised as sovereign subjects. Biography offers creative ways of exploring the complexities of an individual life, while recognising its embeddedness in a web of relationships that open out to include the anthropologist and others.

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Raconter des histoires, projeter des vies: notes vers une biographie anthropologique

Le travail anthropologique qui se concentre sur la vie individuelle, ce que Zeitlyn appelle un "échantillon d'un" (Zeitlyn, 2008, *Social Anthropology*, 16, 154), a longtemps demeuré à la limite de la respectabilité disciplinaire. Au mieux, il s'agit d'une méthodologie de travail sur le terrain, d'un moyen de collecte de données ; au pire, d'une sorte de vulgarisation populaire. Cet essai est une réponse à un intérêt émergent pour la biographie anthropologique. S'appuyant sur la riche histoire du travail novateur avec l'individu, il présente un argument en faveur d'une "ethnographie centrée sur la personne" (Langness and Frank 1981). A travers une juxtaposition de textes classiques et de films, l'article articule une argumentation en faveur de la reconnaissance de l'ethnographie centrée sur la personne comme une forme anthropologique exceptionnellement générative, offrant un contexte critique pour le développement de la pratique contemporaine. Enfin, en cherchant à distinguer ce qui pourrait constituer une biographie anthropologique en tant que mode particulier d'enquête, je propose un réalignement du projet d'écriture de la vie avec le travail humaniste des études biographiques.

Mots-clés: biographie, film ethnographique, subjectivité, écriture expérimentale de vie