

A quill pen is shown in an inkwell on the left side of the slide. The quill is white with a dark tip and is positioned diagonally. The inkwell is a simple, rounded container. The background is a solid dark red color.

*“Literary writing” as a research
tool*

Nathalie Muller Mirza
(University of Neuchâtel)

Researcher's writing

- ☒ Writing is at the heart of the research practices
- ☒ Before, during and after the “field”
 - ☒ as grounding
 - ☒ as transcribing mean
 - ☒ as communicating mean
- ☒ My points:
 - ☒ Writing is a “constructing” tool
 - ☒ Writing is a mediation tool



Points of departure

Some events calling in question the status of
Writing in (Human) Sciences:

☒ *Malinowsky's Diary*

☒ *L'Afrique fantôme* (M. Leiris)



The ambiguous birth of the scientific ethnographic writing

25 years after Malinowsky's death, his Diary is published (1967).

At that time, this book provoked strong reactions in the discipline, as it:

- ☒ Enlightens *the hiatus* between the researcher (as a hero of the scientific universe) and the man
- ☒ And leads to call in question the relation between what is written and the reality

Thus enlightening and calling in question the implicit epistemology of the distinction between subject and reality.

The subjectivity at the heart of an anthropological inquiry

The young Leiris is employed by M. Griaule in order to account - in an ethnographical way - the Dakar-Djibouti expedition, in 1933. And Leiris will account! But of everything...

In his anthropological search he does not make any difference between autobiography, subjectivity and ethnographical, scientific and objective research:

the subjectivity is even thought as a way to reach a scientific description.

Implications

- ☒ On an **epistemological** point of view:
 - ☒ Written accounts of the reality are “(co)construction”
 - ☒ Written accounts have a dialogical dimension
 - ☒ Writing is also a way of “knowing”.

- ☒ On a **methodological** point of view
 - ☒ Integration of
 - ☒ the researcher’s subjectivity (reflexivity)
 - ☒ the object construction processes
 - ☒ the subjects-informators’ voices (polyphony)



A quill pen is positioned vertically in a small, dark red inkwell. The quill is light-colored with a dark tip. The inkwell is cylindrical with a slightly flared top. The background is a solid, dark red color. A long, dark shadow of the quill and inkwell is cast across the bottom right of the image.

A tentative of formalisation
through an example of a research

General context

- ⊠ Domains: Social psychology of learning; adult training field
- ⊠ Aim: to understand how the Malagasy participants to a project of training in agriculture practices give meaning to a design set up by a Swiss institution
- ⊠ Methodology: sharing the everyday life of the Malagasy farmers; observations, interviews...
- ⊠ Writing: several kind of genre - descriptive, narrative, poetic...



What kind of knowledge are constructed?

Literary writing as a mediation tool

- ☒ Between myself as a researcher and my object of study
- ☒ Between myself as a researcher and my “audience”
- ☒ Between myself as a researcher and my Self



Between myself as a researcher and my object of study

Jeudi 14 mai

Aujourd'hui, les informations se sont esquivées, en faisant la sourde oreille ou en déclinant l'offre. Un autre sait mieux, sait plus. A moins que l'on ne puisse dire ce que l'on sait si DadaRabony est là, vivant. Et pourtant, c'est toi, le petit frère à la jambe tordue qui hériterait du bâton hova...

(...) Pour l'instant, les langues sont liées par le charme de Dada, par sa présence de pouvoir et de sacré.

Some observations

- ☒ The text appears rather elliptic
- ☒ But we can guess that:
 - ☒ the researcher did not succeed in her interview
 - ☒ she makes an hypothesis: the questions she raised cannot be answered because of the presence of DadaRabony
- ☒ What is transmitted through this kind of writing?
 - ☒ the text says something about the researcher's experience
 - ☒ and about the object of study...



Between myself as a researcher and my “audience”

La salle de cours de l'Ecole d'ingénieurs vibre des rayons pourpres du soleil de cette fin d'après-midi de mars. Les participants - les uns enveloppés dans leur lamba, portant le chapeau de paille des paysans de la région, les autres en jogging ou en pantalons et chemise - ont repris place sur les chaises en alu, face aux tableaux et à l'animateur principal ; La « Journée formation Diagnostic paysan », organisée par le programme suisse Tany sy Ala, touche à sa fin. C'est maintenant au tour des rapporteurs des groupes de travail de présenter les conclusions de leurs discussions. A un moment donné, convié à cette tâche par son groupe, un jeune homme à l'allure frêle prend la parole, et d'une voix forte pourtant, assurée, conscient de son effet, interroge l'assemblée : « Est-ce que vous les techniciens vous avez vraiment besoin de nous ? Qu'est-ce qui a fait que vous avez changé d'avis et que vous donnez maintenant la parole aux paysans ? Etes-vous vraiment prêts à changer ? ».

Some observations

- ⊠ the description is not systematized
- ⊠ it appears more like a narrative
- ⊠ mostly it seems that all the text is written in order to stress the conclusion...
- ⊠ The aim of this kind of writing is to generate images, emotions from the audience and make them understand maybe more easily what is really important in the situation



Between myself as a researcher and my Self

Samedi 25 avril

Parfois évidemment je me demande ce que je fais là, pourquoi je me sens bien.

J'aime particulièrement ces crépuscules où la lumière se fait fauve sur fond de nuages panthère noire. Les hérons s'élancent doucement. L'air est immobile quand roule le tonnerre au loin. Les herbes longues qui s'ouvrent sur mes pas. Une tache rayonnante sur la montagne juste en face.

Ce n'est pas forcément les gens. Les gens sont comme partout ailleurs. Très souriants derrière leur étonnement.

(/..) Et l'impression que tout passe. Comment retenir ? En écrivant. Mes mots ne se font même pas perles de poésie. Et puis, il ne faut pas croire que je n'ai pas l'ennui...

Some observations

- ✉ The writing itself appears as a mean to preserve and maybe reconstruct the identity



A quill pen is positioned in the lower-left corner, resting in a small, dark red inkwell. The quill is light-colored with a pointed tip. A long, dark shadow of the quill and inkwell extends from the bottom left towards the right side of the image. The background is a solid, dark red color.

Conclusion

“Writing as a tool”

Involving three main actors:

- ☒ A researcher (with his/her emotion, knowledge, situatedness...)
- ☒ People (who are “described” but who also take part in the description of the “reality”)
- ☒ The audience



Literary writing as a research tool?

1) “People-Reality”-researcher

- ☒ It allows to account for the presence of the researcher (that is not neither neutral nor a methodological bias)
- ☒ In making it explicit and objectivated, its subjectivity is made heuristic
- ☒ It allows to account for the interpretative and narrative form of thinking of both people who are described and the researcher (Bruner)
- ☒ It allows to account for the multivoiced process of research making, involving the “reality” and the researcher, but also people and the audience and all their interrelations



2) Audience-researcher

- ☒ It allows to touch emotionally the audience and thus permits them to enter more deeply into the described reality



3) Researcher-Self

- ☒ It allows the researcher her/himself to make present and explicit emotions and feelings that could otherwise make obstacle to her/his work
- ☒ It allows to shape emotions, to formalise the unknown, to overcome the strange
- ☒ to write the “reality” sometimes leads to (re)write her/himself

References

- ☒ Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Harvard: Harvard University Press
- ☒ Kilani, M. (1999). Fictions et vérité dans l'écriture anthropologique, in F. Affergan (sous la dir. de), *Construire le savoir anthropologique* (pp. 83-104). Paris: PUF
- ☒ Muller Mirza, N. (in press). *La naissance et le voyage d'un projet de formation*. Paris : L'Harmattan (collection "Espaces interculturels")
- ☒ Richardson, L. (1992). The consequences of poetic representation: writing the other, rewriting the self, in C. Ellis & M.G. Flaherty (Eds). *Investigating subjectivity: research on lived experience* (pp. 125-140). Newbury Park: Sage
- ☒ Richardson, L. (1994). Writing: a method of inquiry, in N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 516-529). London, New York: Sage
- ☒ Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the field*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

