On communicative worlds

A comment on Michael Carrithers' "Anthropology as irony and philosophy"

Niko BESNIER, *University of Amsterdam*

Michael Carrithers raises important questions about a host of central issues that have preoccupied (or ought to have preoccupied) anthropologists for the last half century at least: the act of reading and its relationship to the intentionality of the writer; the relationship between the propositional value of texts and their poetic (affective, indexical, evocative, metatextual, etc.) value; readers' political or other uses of ethnographic texts; and so on. To come to terms with at least some of these complexities, he finds in the anthropological enterprise profound irony, if we understand irony, with Kenneth Burke, as the communication of several messages at once, none of which is the "true" message but all of which interact with one another. Carrithers finds irony in the fact that all social action is embedded in a nonending flow of social action, as Hannah Arendt and many others have argued (see Sarah Green's introduction to this issue's special section). Yet ethnographic description (e.g., in the form of a published monograph bound between two covers and stamped with a copyright date) requires an artificial suspension of this flow (an "intervention" in the literal sense of the term). Thus the description of social life is, in fact, an impossible enterprise—what Carrithers characterizes as aporia. It is perhaps because of this impossibility that, since the reflexive turn in anthropology in the 1980s, works in the discipline have evolved from ethnographic description to theoretical argumentation that is often grounded on very thin ethnography, a transformation that Carrithers deplores.

There are two interrelated set of dynamics at play in Carrithers' argument, two ways of acting that together form a tight knot: the social action that we as ethnographers try to make sense of (e.g., the Dinka's reaction to events that surround them,

Sri Lankan Buddhist monks attempts to live by their religious ideals), and the act of making sense of this social action, in the form of a monograph, article, lecture, and so on. Here, there is little difference between the oral communication that takes place during typical fieldwork and the written communication favored in ethnographic description, since, here and elsewhere, speaking/hearing and writing/reading are interlocked with one another (see, in a different context, the entanglement of writing and talking in Besnier's [2009: 166–88] analysis of gossip). All are acts of communication that are embedded in the same flow of social action, as illustrated by the fact that, like the social action that makes up the stuff of ethnographic description, the description itself becomes the object of further action, in the form of reviews, embracing readings, rejections, and reinterpretations that may have little to do with the original intention of the author of the description.

This is where I feel that Carrithers' invocation of aporia may not be as much as an impasse as he makes it out to be but rather that the impasse is in fact the consequence of the particular model of communication that he tacitly assumes. By stating that "we can send [our written utterances] into the world, among all those strangers . . . knowing that they will be well and properly received," Carrithers embraces a model of communication as a process of encoding messages (the politician making campaign promises, the griot in the act of praise-singing, the writer at her desk composing her ethnographic text) followed by one of decoding (the listener or reader processing the text, evaluating it, relating it to his or her life). This is a structuralist model with a distinguished history in Western thought, which was perhaps most clearly articulated a century ago by Ferdinand de Saussure. But there are other ways of thinking about the entanglements that Carrithers wrestles with, which may provide more productive insights into the dynamics he is concerned with. One could, for example, invoke a Bakhtinian model of communication (which in more recent decades has given rise to various versions, which acknowledge Mikhail Bakhtin as an antecedent more or less explicitly), in which all acts of communication are essentially multivocal, suffused with the voices of others, ambiguous by nature rather than "truthful," open to interpretation and reinterpretation as messages travel.

Here Bakhtin leads us to an intersubjective approach to communication: not only are messages the echoes of multiple prior messages that color their meanings but meaning is also suspended between communicators, the product of a complex dance that communicators engage in with one another. Here I refer to the kind of reflexivity "that places the cultural assumptions of the ethnographer in question—that clarifies the ethnographic encounter and its limitations as predicated upon the imperfect meshing of two different codes, with its multiplicity of divergent identities and presuppositions" (Herzfeld 2001: 45–46). Engaging squarely with this intersubjectivity, as many authors since the reflexive turn of the 1980s have attempted to do, but remaining committed to ethnography as a sine qua non for an understanding of social life as process and practice, provides the anthropologist the opportunity to intervene in the flow of social action that she seeks to illuminate without running into an impasse. Ethnographic works do not represent societies to their audiences, as Marilyn Strathern (2005: 7) astutely remarks; rather, they build connections between societies and audiences, in some fashion or the other, connections that always remain partial and open-ended—just like the social action that the fieldworker attempts to understand.

Messages never operate in a vacuum but instead are saturated with language ideology, a fact that Carrithers sees as particularly determinative in the academic culture in which we operate, citing Michael Warner (2002). He could alternatively have invoked the now enormous corpus of research on language ideology of the last three decades (Gal and Woolard 2001; Kroskrity 2000; Woolard and Schieffelin 1994; etc.), which has investigated the way in which ideological worlds construct our use of language, shape our understanding of what we and others do with language, and affect the very structure of our language, including the complicated and fascinating relationship between the symbolic, the iconic, and the indexical aspects of language, as well as its propositional, affective, and social dimensions, to which one can also add the political. For example, I am not so not so certain that the "'poetic or textual qualities' of [academic] products are largely irrelevant" because texts are never devoid of poetic qualities. Rather, academic texts (of the traditional kind) adopt an "affect of low affect." How the poetic qualities of a text are configured, read, and evaluated is ideologically determined.

Then there is the question of intentionality, which figures prominently in the distinction that Carrithers makes between intentional (or "performed") and unintentional (or "inadvertent") irony. "Both a minefield and a goldmine" (Herzfeld 2001: 46), intentionality has been the object of substantial scholarly debate in recent decades (Danziger and Rumsey 2013; Duranti 1993; Robbins and Rumsey 2008; Rosen 1995; and many others). While the category appears at first glance to be straightforward and uncomplicated, it is in fact deeply entangled (like Carrithers' thicket of branches) with all sorts of other aspects of human life that anthropologists find useful to talk about: the notion of the person, the (un)fathomability of the minds of others, the nature of the truth, the contextual appropriateness of truth-telling, and so on. One could also add more sociological concerns such as the extent to which intentions are tied to one's role in society: in numerous societies, for example, the intentions of children matter little compared to those of adults, those of women pale in comparison to those of men, and those of low-ranking people hold little sway in comparison to those of important people (Ochs 1988; Besnier 2009: 206–7). It is exactly this kind of consideration that leads us away from a Saussurean encoding–decoding model of communication to one in which texts (whether ethnographic or otherwise) are enmeshed in a world of social relations, ideological constructs, and political dynamics that are as determinative as they are contingent and changing.

Carrithers proposes that "'dialectic' is sibling of 'dialogic,'" an interesting proposal through which he seeks to bring together Socratic dialogue with the dialogism generated by the multiplicity of voices that ethnographic writing (and the ethnographic fieldwork that precedes it) necessarily entails. Where my own view diverges from this proposal is the fact that dialectic relationships are dyadic by definition, as canonically illustrated in the Socratic situation, while dialogism is considerably more complex: not only is dialogism the product of potentially multiple participants and voices, but these entities are not necessarily organized in the orderly dyadic turn-taking that one expects of a Socratic dialogue, for example. Rather, they are typically asynchronous, cacophonic, overlapping, and in competition with one another: stories evoke other stories, casual remarks allude to complex narratives, and languages blend together, as Bakhtin beautifully illustrated in *The*

dialogic imagination (1981). Within anthropology, we find excellent illustrations of the insistently nondyadic and asynchronous nature of dialogism in such works as Keith Basso's (1996) marvelous analysis of Western Apaches evoking an entire moral world by casually dropping a place name, sometimes provoking consternation among all listeners. This is precisely the kind of ethnographic materials that can be turned around and serve as inspiration in our attempt to think through the way our own work travels, is quoted, is appropriate or misappropriated, or alternatively disappears in the darkness of intellectual oblivion (or sold by used book dealers for £693.98).

Carrithers raises some thought-provoking questions about the ways in which the work of anthropologists (or any other scholar or writer, for that matter) is hardly the smooth line from observation to description to appreciation that a simplistic understanding of knowledge production would represent it, but is characterized by multiple knots and entanglements that tie our work in dynamics over which we have little control. Further thought on the topic, which may or may not foreground aporia and irony as a useful way of thinking about these processes, will consist in applying to the politics of knowledge production that same kind of analytic and interpretive scrutiny with which we approach the ethnographic materials we seek to understand, both being, after all, part of the same communicative worlds that we inhabit.

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Niko Besnier is Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. His most recent books are *Gossip and the everyday production of politics* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), *On the edge of the global: Modern anxieties in a Pacific Island nation* (Stanford University Press, 2011) and *Gender on the edge: Transgender, gay, and other Pacific Islanders* (coedited, University of Hawai'i Press, 2014). In 2011, he was awarded a five-year Advanced Grant from the European Research Council for a project entitled "Globalization, Sports, and the Precarity of Masculinity."

Niko Besnier
Afdeling Antropologie
Universiteit van Amsterdam
Postbus 15509
1001 NA Amsterdam, The Netherlands
n.besnier@uva.nl