Robin Ridington: Narrative and Ethnography

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The writing of ethnography is a topic that has started a transformation in how anthropological texts are written and received. The concept of writing for, instead of merely about a culture is still a relatively new concept, but one that has quickly become the more popular approach, replacing the traditional method of writing academic texts. One of the biggest advocates and trailblazers in this new form of ethnographic writing is Robin Ridington, whose work with the Aboriginal peoples of North America has helped redefine how ethnographic writing should be done in the growing field of Interpretative Anthropology. This paper will look at Ridington's contributions; his theoretical basis for why he advocates this choice of writing style; some background information on the peoples he studied, the Dunne-za Aboriginals of northern British Colombia; and finally how he portrays the Aboriginal point of view and perspectives. A large portion of this paper will also be used to analyze a sample of his writings and will look for Ridington's limitations (self confessed and otherwise), how he decided to edit his text, what portions are based on first hand knowledge, and what portions are of his own assumptions. This paper will take a critical look at a portion of Ridington's work to discover the validity and therefore the reliability and accuracy of his writings.

Background

Rather than use a style that mostly reflects the experience of scholars within academic anthropology, I searched for a language of translation that would do justice to the [Aboriginal] style of teaching through which I gained my knowledge of their culture and their experience. That language, I discovered, is one of story telling (Ridington 1988a: xiii)

One of the first things Ridington discovered when doing his fieldwork was that the Aboriginal mindset was much different than the one he grew up with. He needed, and wanted, to find a way of combining the two mindsets to advance his own comprehension, and portray to others, an understanding of the Aboriginal way of life. Ridington writes of this conflation of mindsets in that he had been taught to think of, and to view Aboriginal peoples as subjects for an empirical social science (Ridington 1988a: xi). This was the traditional view in the academic world; Aboriginal peoples were viewed as subjects to be studied, not as 'real' people with their own different, but unique ways of doing things. Ridington would have to balance what he did as a person and what he reported as a social scientist to maintain his objectivity (Ridington 1988a: ix).

The majority of Ridington's work focuses on the Aboriginal group called the Dunne-za – the group in British Columbia, where he did his first and subsequent fieldwork on, beginning

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1 Note: anytime Aboriginal or Dunne-za are used in this fashion they are replacing the out of date term of referring to Aboriginals as "Indian"
officially in the summer of 1964. (Ridington 1988: 20). He had his first encounter with the Dunne-za five years earlier while on a camping trip with two of his friends in the summer of 1959; the experience changed his perceptions and opened his eyes to a new world he did not know existed (Ridington 1988a: 4). Before this first encounter Ridington had no concept of how Aboriginal people had traditionally lived, and his view was stuck in the life long conditioning of growing up in the American northwest along with his academic knowledge and experience. At this time, Murdock's Ethnographic Bibliography of North America, was the standard academic reference work, and by his own admission, Ridington assumed that 'its authenticity, the methods, purposes, and metaphors governing that literature ruled supreme,' in other words he did not question the text because at this point in his life and experience he had no reason to doubt its validity (Ridington 1988a: ix). Ridington almost immediately discovered that a piece of academic writing cannot always be taken as absolute fact, for he soon found out that the so-called 'supreme' academic authority of Aboriginals in North America did not even have the correct name of the people Ridington would spend the majority of his life studying. Traditional academic texts from that era referred to the group as the Beaver People or Beaver Indians, but Ridington almost immediately discovered that the people actually called themselves the Dunne-za, which means 'Real People' (Ridington 1988a: ix). Ridington quickly realized that the traditional way of writing ethnography was insufficient because the Dunne-za train of thought, what he calls their thoughtworld, could not be accurately portrayed by simple observation and recording. He would need to take a different approach; he would use a narrative style of writing in his ethnographic works.

**Writing Ethnography: The Narrative**

"I have used a narrative style to develop some sense of the mutual understanding, based on shared experience, that underlines Dunne-za discourse. I have written with a combination of retrospection and introspection to describe the dynamics of change and stability in a northern hunting culture... I have attempted to show how Dunne-za mythic reality lies within the reality of everyday experience" (Ridington 1988a: xii)

Ridington believed that the best way to accurately portray the Dunne-za culture and thoughtworld in his ethnographic texts was to use a narrative writing style. He was not the first ethnographer to use this style, but he helped popularize the method among anthropologists. The research or 'facts' were not the only important part of the ethnography; how it was written became just as, if not more, important. 'Literary processes - metaphor, figuration, narrative - affect the ways cultural phenomenon are registered, from the first jotted "observations", to the completed book, to the ways these configurations "make sense" in determining acts of reading' (Clifford 1986: 4). In order to accomplish his vision, Ridington used the narrative under the canopy of Interpretative Anthropology. Interpretative Anthropology as a discipline was founded by Clifford
Geertz, and although Ridington never mentions or quotes Geertz, it seems that Ridington had to be influenced by him. 'Interpretative Anthropology can be a profound source of revelation about the subject peoples it examines as well as about the ethnographic enterprise itself, but it is an approach founded upon paradox and not without personal and intellectual risks' (Review Article T.H: 213). This idea of Interpretative Anthropology as being laden with 'paradox' and 'intellectual risks' are good points that refer to the limitations in the interpretation approach, and therefore the narrative method. But Ridington does not critically discuss these limitations, although he does hint at his own limitations in writing an accurate portrayal of Dunne-za culture, and the difficulties he discovered – this area will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

Ridington seems convinced that the best way to bridge the gap between Western and Aboriginal cultures is by the use of the narrative. According to Ridington, 'an interpretive language is best suited to make sense of the ideas subarctic people have about knowledge and power' (Ridington 1988b: 98). One would assume that what he means by 'make sense' is to clarify for Western readers, to give them a way to better understand the Aboriginal cultures within their own society. Anthropological theory should represent the thoughtworlds of the people being studied without biases being imposed by our own worldviews. By attempting to apply academically defined categories, the thoughtworlds of Aboriginal peoples could become distorted with “bizarre” and “ethnocentric” results (Ridington 1988b: 98). Ridington sees all people as having the same or common core of identity. The communication between different groups of people is possible through this shared core (Ridington 1988a: x).

At first glance this may seem naive, an easy and general explanation to explain that despite our differences in ideologies and experiences, we are all capable of communication, essentially because we are all human. But this is a useful concept to be used to point out that different groups do have differences and we need a way to overcome those differences if are going to learn anything from one another. In Ridington's view communication is possible through storytelling because we are characters in other peoples' stories (1988a: x-xi). It would seem that Ridington is referring to his own experience in the above quote. Although he does make a good point, he fails to note that the stories, and therefore the communication, are not always within positive relationships, and many stories may even end up cutting off that communication if relations continue to be less than ideal. It is clear that Ridington is talking about his communication with the Dunne-za in that it was a positive experience, positive communication, but in the greater world the communication between groups will not always be positive.

In keeping with the Dunne-za people, Ridington had to 'discover a language of interpretation and description to communicate between Dunne-za
knowledge and the knowledge of academic anthropology. Both forms of knowledge use metaphors based on unstated assumptions about the fundamental nature of reality' (Ridington 1988a: xi). Ridington would have to grasp an understanding of the Dunne-za nature of reality in order to describe and relate it to a Western nature of reality so his audience could gain a more accurate understanding for themselves about the Dunne-za thoughtworld.

Ridington's main goal was an attempt to translate the Dunne-za stories into the academic language used by anthropology while maintaining the story telling style of the people who told them (Ridington 1990: xiv). 'Narrative ethnography provides a genre in which to communicate another culture's metaphors, philosophy, and style of discourse to a Western audience' (Ridington 1988a: xiii).

Ridington is confident in his use of a narrative writing style, but is also clear on the reasons why he chose that method of writing. He chose to write his ethnographies in a narrative style because it allowed him to communicate the Dunne-za world through their metaphors and ideas of individual experience in the context that he learned them (Ridington 1988a: xi). He makes it clear that he is limited by his own experiences and that he can never have a true, insider understanding of the Dunne-za thoughtworld, but that was not his objective; his ultimate goal was to make an attempt to bridge the gap between two different cultures for a better sense of mutual understanding. The main problem is that, 'the simplest cultural accounts are intentional creations that interpreters constantly construct through the others they study' (Clifford 1986: 10).

Even though there are obvious limitations with his approach, Ridington believes that narrative shares ethnographic authority because it gives a stronger voice to the people being studied, allowing their views to be better seen and understood (Ridington 1988a: xiii). By using a narrative writing style Ridington is using the Dunne-za's perspectives as the main entity in his writings. Instead of simply taking what he sees, he is using the actual stories/accounts told to him by the Dunne-za themselves to get a better understanding of not just how they live, but also of how they think. Ridington also mentions that, 'narrative ethnography is radical only in it’s questioning of the social science assumption that experience should be instrumental rather than integral to ethnographic description' (1988: xii).

By using a narrative style, Ridington is attempting to limit assumptions, to get under the surface of the Dunne-za to understand their thoughtworld, to use, as Geertz would say, thick description. Ridington points out that experience only becomes meaningful under the umbrella of shared experience, that shared experience is one of the main concepts Ridington focuses on throughout his works (Ridington 2006: 126).

The more traditional ethnographic texts organized ‘around a paradigm or theoretical model such as functionalism, structuralism, or an “interpretative” point of view’ (Ridington 1988a: xiii). This kind of paradigm writing was firmly
embedded in the Western way of thinking. Ridington in contrast wished to 'explain or interpret other cultures in the language of one or another of the competing paradigms,' in other words, Ridington has no defined paradigm within which he writes. He uses ideas and concepts from various paradigms as it relates to what he is trying to achieve with his narrative style of writing ethnography. To Ridington, the Dunne-za culture itself is his paradigm (1988a: xiii). Ridington uses the approach in an attempt to overcome the limitations of traditional ethnographic texts. The main limitation is in the interpretative approach, as best described by Clifford, in that it is 'apparent that there is no "complete" corpus of First-Time knowledge, that no one – least of all the visiting ethnographer – can know this lore except through an open-ended series of contingent, power-laden encounters' (1986: 8). Clifford makes an excellent point, and one that Ridington also mentions throughout his work, mainly through his repeated attempts to clarify that he is writing of his own personal experience and his own interpretations of the Dunne-za culture.

Ridington does his best to give the Dunne-za view of their thoughtworld to gain a better understanding of them as a whole. Clifford puts it better in saying that, 'once cultures are no longer prefigured – as objects, theatres, texts – it becomes possible to think of a cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances. In a discursive rather than a visual paradigm, the dominant metaphors for ethnography shift away from the observing eye and towards expressive speech' (1986: 12). This is what Ridington is attempting to accomplish: to not 'prefigure' cultures. Ridington explains that the validity of ethnographic authority has recently begun to be questioned by anthropologists. Recognition that the authority of ethnography is not theirs alone, but of a joint collaboration they share with the culture they study (Ridington 1988a: xii). By using a collaborated approach in the study of different cultures, the Dunne-za are also practicing a form of anthropology in which they are learning about the culture of the visiting anthropologist. They do this to obtain a better understanding of the larger world outside that of their own thoughtworld, to better exist within the larger world they are a part of, and to grasp a better understanding of their presence within that world (Ridington 1988a: x). This train of thinking is similar to Clifford's dialogical approach in that it helps us to look under the surface. 'Once "informants" begin to be considered as co-authors, and the ethnographer as scribe and archivist as well as interpreting observer, we can ask new, critical questions of all ethnographers' (Clifford 1986: 17).

Knowledge and Learning

"Knowledge, for them, was something a person integrated immediately into a shared thoughtworld through the authority of his or her own experience. Knowledge, I came to learn, was a primary form of individual empowerment" (Ridington 1988a: x).
One of the major themes throughout Ridington’s works is the concept of knowledge and learning. This is central to his work because he repeatedly observed that the Aboriginal people he was studying had a very different view of topics than that of Ridington himself. He realized early on that he was not only learning about the Dunne-za, but he was learning from them as well. As Ridington describes, ‘part of that learning was the realization that an anthropologist’s own experience is a proper, even essential, subject of inquiry. Part of that learning was the search for an appropriate language of interpretation, one that would do justice both to the [Dunne-za] reality, and to my own experience of it’ (Ridington 1988a: ix).

One of the main problems that occurs when writing about knowledge is a need of an understanding of what knowledge means and how it is perceived to the culture being studied. This was one of the first challenges Ridington had to face: creating a way of thinking outside of his own world and his own preconceived notions of what knowledge was. Academic training gave Ridington knowledge learned from books and authorities. The Dunne-za enlightened Ridington that knowledge can come from, or reveal itself by person experience (1988a: xi). By understanding the difference between the two systems of knowledge, Ridington was able to expand his own thoughtworld, and in turn grasp a better understanding of the Dunne-za. Direct experience by living in the world give the Dunne-za knowledge and power through dreaming and a mystic reality that becomes apparent through the vision quest. Anthropologists, by contrast, gain their knowledge and power from books and institutions, with first hand knowledge perhaps only gained through fieldwork experiences (Ridington 1990: xv).

This is a very distinctive realization: people in the Western intellectual tradition read and are told what is seen as fact and truth. We tend to take these so-called facts at face value, rarely questioning the dominant train of thought. The Dunne-za on the other hand experience their knowledge first hand. They know something is truth because they have experienced what they know; they build their knowledge throughout the many experiences and dreams in their lives. As Ridington puts it, ‘Dunne-za knowledge is highly contextualized with experience rather than instrumental to purposes removed from experience... every person “knows something” from experience’ (1990: xv). This knowledge by experience is a recurring theme in Ridington’s works. He attempts to interpret the Dunne-za knowledge system so that he can write about their culture in his own Western system of knowledge, with his use of narrative. To Ridington, ‘academic learning generally views information as objective and therefore removed from the learner’s experience. [Aboriginal] learning is contextualized within experience, so that a distinction between separate objective and subjective realities becomes meaningless’ (1990: xvi).

Along with being an important concept to Ridington, knowledge is also an important aspect to everyday
Dunne-za life. ‘Subarctic people assume that the events of individual experience are connected to an empowering wealth of cultural tradition. They assume that an individual receives power by acquiring direct knowledge of sentient beings referred to in the mythic language of oral traditions’ (Ridington 1988b: 105). This would be the main reason why elders in an Aboriginal society like the Dunne-za are the leaders of their people; they have the most experience and therefore the most knowledge, which is a paramount concept in their social structure. In western societies the people with the most knowledge are not, in most cases, the leaders. The leaders are the most persuasive and the most popular politicians voted to lead. Ridington explains knowledge empowers people with intelligence and understanding. Knowledge gives someone authority when they may be the only one with that knowledge. When a person uses that authority of their experience, the Dunne-za refers to them as “little bit know something” (1990: xv).

In Western society intelligence takes precedence over knowledge. We expand our knowledge through academic learning to increase our intelligence, instead of gaining knowledge through experience. To the Dunne-za everything they experience, on an everyday basis adds to their knowledge. But unlike in our own society they do not flaunt this knowledge in a claim to be more intelligent. Since everything is learned through experience, everyone has an equal capacity to acquire the same, or more accurately, similar amounts of knowledge. ‘A single moment is meaningful in relation to every other moment that is apart of a shared experience. Communication within a small [N]ative community relies extensively on a background of shared experience and unstated mutual understandings’ (Ridington 1988a: xiv).

**Narrative: A Brief Look at the Writings of Robin Ridington**

“Until Johnny and the others rode into my life on that June day in 1959, I had not really thought of [N]ative Americans as people living in a world that could connect to my own. Since that day, I have not been able to think about life in North America without reference to their existence.” (Ridington 1988a: 9).

The following section will examine the way Ridington has used the narrative writing style in his texts. It will consist of a brief summarization of a selection of Ridington’s articles, taken from a selection of his books, along with a critical look of how he wrote these ethnographic accounts to determine if he is indeed following the methods he advocates. This section will take a critical look at two of Ridington’s well known works to get a sense of his writing style and whether or not this writing style has changed over his ethnographic career.

The above quote was taken from the first chapter in Ridington’s book *Trail To Heaven*, which is a compilation of a number of his early ethnographic accounts. This first chapter recalled Ridington’s initial encounter with the Dunne-za, and would change Ridington’s entire world view and
shape the way he would do his work for the next half a century.

This first encounter would happen almost by chance one summer on a camping trip with friends. After several weeks of wilderness living, Ridington and his two friends were visited by a group of Dunne-za led by a man named Johnny Chipesia (Ridington 1988a: 7-8). After being asked what they had been eating (a diet consisting mainly of sacks of grain, peanut butter and jam), two of the younger Dunne-za left into the wood. A mere hour later they returned with a skinned and quartered deer. This was an amazing achievement in the eyes of Ridington and his friends. They had tried to do some hunting but failed to even see a deer. What seemed impossible to Ridington was effortless to the Aboriginals (Ridington 1988a: 9). Ridington recounted his preconception of how he was conditioned to think how a deer should be processed. A deer would be killed by a hunter, then brought more or less whole back to town and taken to a professional butcher to prepare and make the meat suitable for consumption. The Aboriginal youths did none of the ‘right things’ in his view as he had experienced from books and experience, but the deer was effortlessly processed by these boys into convenient pieces which Ridington and his friends were more then happy to eat (Ridington 1988a: 9-10).

This was a good article in that it shows Ridington’s initial ignorance and preconceptions of Aboriginal people. It also contrasts the different thoughtworlds of the two different cultures. Even in this first article Ridington is noting the differing views of the world, and what he did to overcome that split to be able to not only relate to the Dunne-za, but also tell their stories in a meaningful way. But even through his limitation Ridington was able to pick up on the subtleness of the underlying messages being portrayed to him and his friends. As Ridington notes, *Johnny wanted us to know that this valley... was theirs because of the intimate knowledge they have of it. The ease they displayed in this place where we were as yet clumsy and ill at ease gave us their message in a language more powerful than words... the rights they demonstrated by feeding us that day carried more authority than stacks of dusty documents in distant offices. Johnny’s way of telling us we were on his land was to feed us from it’* (Ridington 1988a: 10).

This one quote sums up what this paper was attempting to get at. By writing in the narrative style Ridington was able to point out how the Dunne-za thought process was different than that of the Western one, and also put it in a way that makes sense to his audience. The concepts of the different views of knowledge are written all over this first chapter. The recognition of these differing views makes it possible to understand the other more clearly. Ridington makes this clarification with the use of the narrative.

The next article that will be looked at is taken from *Little Bit Know Something* (Ridington 1990), which is also a compilation of a number of Ridington’s articles originally written.
for academic journals. Although this book has several different sections with a broader theoretical repertoire, including articles on hierarchy, this paper will look at an article entitled ‘A True Story’ taken from the ethnographic section, for comparison’s sake. This article is told in a narrative style but it is done in a different fashion than in the previous article examined. It is at its most basic an example used by Ridington to show how he takes what is told to him by his informants, and how he writes it for an academic text.

It is a story told by an old Dunne-za woman named Nachi. It recounts a tale when Nachi was young about a time of food scarcity in the cold winter months. Nachi and her relative decided to split up to look for food. After along trek Nachi came across a hole. After probing the hole with a stick she determined there was nothing there. But after noticing damaged branches from a near by tree along with a large, chewed branch, she thought it could be a bear’s den. Nachi returned to the group’s camp and learned that no one had found any food. After showing them the stick it was clear that she had found a bear’s den. She led some of the men back to the den where the bear was killed and skinned. After that they were able to continue through the winter, food became easier to come by after that night (Ridington 1990: 23-26).

After Nachi’s story is Ridington’s interpretation of her story. To my surprise it was a lot more detailed than that of the original. Ridington uses a very descriptive narrative form to retell Nachi’s story. Describing things such as the ‘cold night sky’, the ‘moon overhead’, and her breath ‘lingering’ in the air are all added embellishments that Ridington would have no first hand knowledge of and are essentially assumptions used to ‘better’ describe the environment in which the story takes place. It begs the question - does Ridington make these creative additions to all of the stories he has ended up retelling in a Western style of writing?

Ridington also adds some of the concepts talked about in this paper, mainly the idea of dreams and knowledge. In Ridington’s account of Nachi’s story, she was not merely searching for food, she was, in a way, predestined to find the bear that would feed her group. In Ridington’s words, ‘the Dreamer left a sign for this child. He broke sticks for her and marked them with his teeth’ (Ridington 1990: 26-27). This is an interesting view, though Nachi herself made no mention of a Dreamer in her story. The concept of the Dreamer was that of Ridington’s experience with the Dunne-za thoughtworld. He made this connection in his story, thought Nachi did not make it in hers. It is interesting to observe how simple inferences and assumptions could change a story and its meaning so drastically. Ridington did it to relate the story to a more academic audience, but in doing so robbed the story from the original teller, just this paper has probably done to Ridington’s work.

Conclusion

The narrative style of writing ethnography is a very useful way of portraying the stories of another culture. But like any approach it has
its flaws and limitations. Anytime someone retells another’s story the essence of the original is changed and sometimes lost completely. Ridington does not escape these limitations. By essentially rewriting the Dunne-zá stories under the guise of his own experience, he is editing the core of that story to make it his own, to present it to a wider audience. But Ridington does find a workable balance between the two. Although he is rewriting stories in his own words, the question of the validity of his work never occurred. By working extensively with another culture, ethnographers can gain a unique insight into the ‘thoughtworld’ of others, and the use of the narrative is one of the clearest ways to present this insight to a Western audience.

References


