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Speculative Anthropology

A Literary History of Contamination

Final

For Christian Kupchik (1954-2023) in loving memory and gratitude

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Points of Departure

The late Argentinian writer Juan José Saer (1937–2005), critical friend of Jorge Luis Borges, coined the notion ‘speculative anthropology’ as a tentative definition of ‘fiction’. Saer was not an anthropologist or ethnographer; the academic affiliation would rather be philosophy, history and comparative literature. His novels are intricate explorations of Argentina’s present and past, with a certain gravitation centre in his home province Santa Fe. The essays are mostly examples of subtle and intelligent literary critique of individual works and authorships – Borges is a recurring subject – or phenomena like “*le nouveau roman*”. It is in the rather short but dense essay *El concepto de ficción* (1989)³ that he arrives, exhausted, at the surprising definition.

Because of this most important aspect of the fictional narrative, and also because of its intentions, its practical resolution, and the singular position of its author between the imperatives of objective knowledge and the turbulence of subjectivity, we can define the fiction in a general way as a *speculative anthropology*. Perhaps – I do not dare to assert it – this way of conceiving fiction could neutralize the various reductionisms that, ever since the nineteenth century, have persistently lashed out at it. Understood in this way, fiction might be able, not to ignore them, but to assimilate them, incorporating them into its own essence and stripping them of their claims to being absolute. But the subject is arduous, and it is better left for another time (Saer 1997:16, my italics).

That other occasion unfortunately never occurred, and we are hence left with this intriguing suggestion. I have referred to it several times, most extensively in my exploration of truth and fiction in South Africa and Argentina (Hemer 2012:24-26). Now I take it as one of my points of departure for a more thorough, and *speculative*, interrogation of the intersection of fiction and ethnography, from the literary writer’s perspective.

The second point of departure is the even more intriguing notion of *contamination*, which I first came across in its positive sense in British Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah’s comprehensive *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers*. “In Praise of Contamination” is an intermediate headline in one of the chapters (Appiah 2006: 111-113). By evoking Roman (Carthagian) playwright Terence (Publius Terentius Afer), whose mode of combining tragedy and comedy was known as *contamination*, Appiah outlines a literary tradition that goes back at least two thousand years, and he suggests Salman Rushdie to be its

³ It was originally published in the important Argentinian journal *Punto de vista*. When Saer collected his literary essays from more than three decades (1965-1996) in one volume, he made an exception to the chronological order by putting *El concepto de ficción* first and letting it give name to the whole collection (Saer 1997).

most articulate contemporary proponent. In an article that was published as a preview of the book, “The Case for Contamination”, he further emphasises the evocative term as a counter-ideal to (cultural) purity and preservation and explains the choice of his two literary examples.

Terence had a notably firm grasp on the range of human variety: “So many men, so many opinions” was a line of his. And it’s in his comedy “The Self-Tormentor” that you’ll find what may be the golden rule of cosmopolitanism – *Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto* – “I am human, nothing human is alien to me”. The context is illuminating. A busybody farmer named Chremes is told by his neighbour to mind his own affairs; the *homo sum credo* is Chremes’ breezy rejoinder. It isn’t meant to be an ordinance from on high; it’s just the case for gossip. Then again, gossip – the fascination people have for the small doings of other people – has been a powerful force for conversation among cultures.

The ideal of contamination has few exponents more eloquent than Salman Rushdie, who has insisted that the novel that occasioned his fatwa “celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelisation and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotch-potch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world.” No doubt there can be an easy and spurious utopianism of “mixture”, as there is of “purity” or “authenticity”. And yet the larger human truth is on the side of contamination – that endless process of imitation and revision.⁴

In fact, Appiah says little more about the supposed tradition. The only writers he mentions are Terence and Rushdie. I regard it as a tentative idea, in a category like Saer’s ‘speculative anthropology’, and I am taking on the challenge of outlining and exploring this tradition – but possibly in a different direction.

Contaminated Diversity

Here is another, more recent approach to contamination:

How does a gathering become a “happening”, that is, greater than a sum of its parts? One answer is contamination. We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects, mutual worlds – and new directions – may emerge. Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option (Tsing 2015:27).

Chinese American anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing further states that collaboration means *working across difference*, which leads to contamination. Without collaboration we all die (Ibid.:28). *I. e.*, without contamination, we all die.

In her unexpected best-seller *The Mushroom at The End of The World*, Tsing makes a fascinating ethnographic enquiry into the global economy of the matsutake mushrooms, growing in ruined forests around the post-industrial world and largely picked by South Asian foragers

⁴ *New York Times*, 1 January 2006. The Rushdie quote is from *Imaginary Homelands* (1992:394).

in Oregon, USA, for the Japanese market, where it is highly priced not only for its unique culinary qualities but also as a symbolic gift. In her previous work, Tsing had launched *friction* as a key concept, in response to the tired idea of a “clash” of civilizations: friction as a metaphor for the diverse and conflicting social interactions that make up the contemporary world (Tsing 2005). ‘Contamination’ is more refined, understood as *transformation through encounter*. It becomes an antidote to the assumption of self-containment (and the self-interest of individuals), and hence to the fatal idea of economy *and* ecology as sites for “algorithms of progress-as-expansion” (Tsing 2015:28).

Contaminated diversity is everywhere, but we tend not to see it, and/or we don’t make use of these stories in our understanding of the world. Why, Tsing asks, and suggests a partial answer that makes an even stronger incitement to insist on a term that evokes such mixed reactions.

One reason is that contaminated diversity is complicated, often ugly, and humbling. Contaminated diversity implicates survivors in histories of greed, violence and environmental destruction [...] The survivors of war remind us of the bodies they climbed over – or shot – to get to us. We don’t know whether to love or hate these survivors. Simple moral judgments don’t come to hand.

Worse yet, Contaminated diversity is recalcitrant to the kind of “summing up” that has become the hallmark of modern knowledge. Contaminated diversity is not only particular and historical, ever changing, but also relational. It has no self-contained units; its units are encounter-based collaborations (Ibid.:33-34).

The matsutake forest is the epitome of the colonial plantation, which served as model for later industrialisation and modernisation. It is an anti-plantation, impossible to cultivate. In Japan, matsutake is almost always a gift. No one buys a fine matsutake just to eat. The mushroom rooms build relationships, and as gifts they cannot be separated from these relationships. Matsutake becomes an extension of the person, the definitional feature of value in a gift economy (Ibid.:123). As a grocer tells Anna Tsing: “You can understand France without knowing about truffles, but you can’t understand Japan without knowing matsutake”. Relations are not only inter-personal but inter-species. And human disturbance is not necessarily damage. From the forest’s point of view, the Japanese Meiji Restoration in the mid nineteenth century and the Chinese Giant Leap Forward in the mid twentieth century are comparable disturbances. Tsing’s interrogation is an eye-opener, constantly challenging not only the conventional presumptions but also those that one may have cherished as radical or imaginative.

But how does the notion of ‘contaminated diversity’ relate to a supposed literary tradition? Appiah’s suggestion was made in the context of cosmopolitanism – Contamination, to him, is

primarily an ethical and political proposal in response to the claims for purity that had surged again in the early 2000s, in the wake of the war on terror, the alleged ‘clash of civilisations’ etc. Terence was an early proponent of cosmopolitanism. Clearly, Appiah’s other example, Salman Rushdie, is – *was* – as much a political figure as a literary creator. The fatwa made it difficult to separate the two sides; when Arjun Appadurai a decade earlier had used Rushdie as proof of the social and political impact of literature, he was probably rather referring to the inflammatory force of rumour – about the blasphemy of the *Satanic Verses* – than the revolutionary *literary* power inherent in the work itself (Appadurai 1996:58). Tsing is also, albeit not as explicitly, writing in a context of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitan knowledge, she says,

develops out of historical mergings with research subjects, living and non-living, and with itself in other forms (Tsing 2015:239).

Her ethics is aiming for “good-enough” worlds, where “good-enough” is always imperfect and under revision (Ibid.:255). And, regarding our specific purpose here: Tsing’s ‘creative non-fiction’ arguably inscribes itself in Appiah’s suggested tradition – or my slightly distorted one. *The Mushroom at the End of the World* reads as a hybrid of theoretical treaty, travel report and literary essay – with a layer of meta-reflection, which in the final concluding chapter is voiced in her reflection: “What kind of book is this that refuses to end?” (Ibid.:287).

A Global-Southern Purview

Departure is also embarkation, and both connote traveling – a journey. I would be tempted to quote the French surrealist ethnographers that I refer to in Chapter I: *Ceci n’est pas un voyage*. But this *is* a journey of sorts, literally and metaphorically. By way of preparation for the workshop/seminar road trip from Gothenburg to Berlin that formed the backbone of the collaborative part of the *Conviviality and Contamination* project, I made a one-month tour of South Africa in March 2022, and a year later I spent two months in Australia. For the chapter on Argentina (III: Wonderland) I am also partly relying on impressions from my latest visit to the country, in November 2019, just before the world locked down due to the Covid pandemic. Other previous personal experiences from the Global South have also informed the text, most importantly my two-year residence as “dependent” in Ethiopia in the late ‘80s. I have kept a journal before, during and after the collaborative project, an undertow that occasionally comes to the surface as “interludes”, referring to my earlier “contaminations and ethnographic fictions” (Hemer 2020), as well as my comparative study of fiction and truth in

transition, in South Africa and Argentina (Hemer 2012), which are previous points of embarkation on this same journey.

I am well aware that I am inevitably following in the tracks of mostly male white writers, anthropologists and world reporters who have almost exclusively travelled from North to South, from the ‘metropole’ to the ‘periphery’ (colony or postcolony), not only as voyagers but *voyeurs* of marginal people and their customs, seeking either to turn an Other into a Same or to idealize a primordial nobility and even ‘go native’. However much I may defy ‘woke’ and identity politics and refute allegations of ‘cultural appropriation’, I cannot escape my white skin or the fact that I have grown up in (formerly social-democratic) Scandinavia, a marginal yet relatively privileged corner of the Western world. My primary aim is however not to report back to where I come from, but rather to seek connections between the different parts of the Global South that have provided most of the material for this study. To paraphrase Andrew Gibson, whom I am referring to extensively in Chapter IV, it is my deliberate intention to adopt a global-southern purview in my speculative staging of contamination as a transgressive literary tradition.