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# Contaminations and Ethnographic Fictions

## Southern Crossings

Oscar Hemer

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Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology

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Deborah Reed-Danahay
Department of Anthropology
The State University of New York at Buffalo
Buffalo, NY, USA

Helena Wulff
Department of Social Anthropology
Stockholm University
Stockholm, Sweden

This series explores new ethnographic objects and emerging genres of writing at the intersection of literary and anthropological studies. Books in this series are grounded in ethnographic perspectives and the broader cross-cultural lens that anthropology brings to the study of reading and writing. The series explores the ethnography of fiction, ethnographic fiction, narrative ethnography, creative nonfiction, memoir, autoethnography, and the connections between travel literature and ethnographic writing.

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Oscar Hemer
School of Arts and Communication, K3
Malmö University
Malmö, Sweden

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*For Thomas and Beata*

# Series Editors' Preface

***Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology*** publishes explorations of new ethnographic objects and emerging genres of writing at the intersection of literary and anthropological studies. Books in this series are grounded in ethnographic perspectives and the broader cross-cultural lens that anthropology brings to the study of reading and writing. By introducing work that applies an anthropological approach to literature, whether drawing on ethnography or other materials in relation to anthropological and literary theory, this series moves the conversation forward not only in literary anthropology, but also in general anthropology, literary studies, cultural studies, sociology, ethnographic writing and creative writing. The "literary turn" in anthropology and critical research on world literatures share a comparable sensibility regarding global perspectives.

Fiction and autobiography have connections to ethnography that underscore the idea of the author as ethnographer and the ethnographer as author. Literary works are frequently included in anthropological research and writing, as well as in studies that do not focus specifically on literature. Anthropologists take an interest in fiction and memoir set in their field locations, and produced by "native" writers, in order to further their insights into the cultures and contexts they research. Experimental genres in anthropology have benefitted from the style and structure of fiction and autoethnography, as well as by other expressive forms ranging from film and performance art to technology, especially the Internet and social media. There are renowned fiction writers who trained as anthropologists, but moved on to a literary career. Their

anthropologically inspired work is a common sounding board in literary anthropology. In the endeavour to foster writing skills in different genres, there are now courses on ethnographic writing, anthropological writing genres, experimental writing and even creative writing taught by anthropologists. And increasingly, literary and reading communities are attracting anthropological attention, including an engagement with issues of how to reach a wider audience.

***Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology*** publishes scholarship on the ethnography of fiction and other writing genres, the connections between travel literature and ethnographic writing, and Internet writing. It also publishes creative work such as ethnographic fiction, narrative ethnography, creative non-fiction, memoir and autoethnography. Books in the series include monographs and edited collections, as well as shorter works that appear as Palgrave Pivots. This series aims to reach a broad audience among scholars, students and a general readership.

Deborah Reed-Danahay and Helena Wulff
Co-Editors, Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology

# Acknowledgements

This book is the end result of a project I embarked on as a fellow at Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS) in the beginning of 2015. It was formulated within the Institute's longer-term theme "Crossing Borders" and had on the outset the provisional double title "Writing Across Borders/In Praise of Impurity". I am immensely grateful to STIAS for offering me the privilege to be part of their creative environment for three full months, during which I enjoyed the inspiration from a wide range of fellow researchers who happened to share this crucial moment in recent South African history with me. Whether they like it or not, many of them appear with their forenames in the text, and I wish to especially thank Simon Bekker, Michael Blake, Denis-Constant Martin, Francis Nyamnjoh, Elmi Muller, Anne Phillips and Mats Rosengren for providing input of specific relevance for my own research. Although not a STIAS fellow at the time, but previously and later, Aryan Kaganof has also been a very important reference point and is subsequently a recurrent protagonist in my text. Susan Hayden, my former student and proof-reader, is likewise in that category of long-term relationships.

The stay at STIAS was fundamental for the realisation of this kamikaze project. But it had a prehistory and an aftermath. My first attempt at genre transgression in the borderlands of literature and anthropology, *Hillbrow Blues* (2008; 2012), was an offspring of my then ongoing artistic research project on *Fiction and Truth in Transition*, and I thank Magnus Ödmark for being so insistent on having me contribute to his

literary anthology *Scenanvisningar för ett större sällskap* [Stage directions for a larger group]. The English version was also produced on commission for an anthology, to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the *Time of the Writer* Festival, in which I had participated in 2007. Time of the Writer in Durban was at the time arguably one of the most vital annual cultural events in South Africa, and being a participant with writers from all over the continent was for me personally a watershed moment; my decision to write in English, not only for academic but also literary purposes, was founded there. I salute the former Festival General Peter Rorvik for inviting me and Michael Chapman, the editor of *Africa Inside Out,* for selecting my contribution. Peter was also a partner, with Keyan Tomaselli and Ruth Teer-Tomaselli, on the *Memories of Modernity* project (2005–2007) that brought me back to South Africa for the first time, after my primordial visit as a reporter in 1991. *Memories of Modernity*'s transgressive attempt at artistic and academic collusion, including the art exhibition *Houses of Memory* which travelled from Durban to Malmö, served as a kind of dress rehearsal for my Fiction and Truth project.

Kathrine Winkelhorn, my cherished former colleague at Malmö University, had co-coordinated the Durban collaboration and was also my partner on the sequel *Mediating Modernity* project in Bangalore (2012–2013), which was to provide the material for the second "ethnographic fiction", *Bengaluru Boogie* (2015; 2017). For the Bangalore material, I am enormously indebted to our Indian co-coordinators Jyothsna Belliappa and Deepak Srinivasan, and artist Ayisha Abraham who contributed the photos that form an intrinsic part of the collaborative "transdisciplinary intervention".

Like the *Hillbrow Blues*, the Bengaluru Boogie has been published previously, in both English and Swedish. I regard them, however, as "prequels" to the *Cape Calypso*, and hence integral parts of the grander project—which I half-jokingly refer to as the World Waltz—and I thank UKZN Press and Lit Verlag for generously permitting me to include revised versions of them in this volume, as an overture to the main text.

After the three months at STIAS, which was my seventh journey to South Africa, I have obsessively returned another six times, whereof two were short stop-overs in Johannesburg on the way to Mozambique. I am especially grateful to Mariekie Burger for inviting me to give a seminar at the University of Johannesburg and Cheryl Stobie for hosting me as a visiting researcher at UKZN. In March 2018, I spent four decisive weeks in Pietermaritzburg, working on the second part of the diptych, which

I finalised in October the same year on an equally productive private "retreat" in Paris. Cheryl has been one of my most trusted readers, and her advice and encouragement have been immensely important for the conclusion of the project.

Except for the STIAS grant, the main part of this project has been carried out without any external funding, within the confines of my professorship at Malmö University and largely as self-financed research. Malmö's School of Arts and Communication (K3) has as always provided an inspiring environment, and I especially thank my colleagues on the Communication for Development M.A. programme and the fellow researchers in the *Conviviality at the Crossroads* network, which now forms part of the wider research platform *Rethinking Democracy* (REDEM). It is not a mere coincidence that *Cape Calypso* was finalised in parallel with my coordination of the Conviviality network, which is centred around another book project, in close collaboration between Malmö University and Bard College Berlin.[1] I am grateful to all the network members for valuable feedback at workshops and seminars, and especially to my Berlin colleague Kerry Bystrom, the only other researcher I know that shares my specific obsession with South Africa *and* Argentina. My heartfelt thanks also to Mary al-Sayed and Madison Allums at Palgrave Macmillan for the smooth and efficient editorial collaboration on both these book projects. Working with them has been a pleasure from the very first contact.

Many others, colleagues and friends, have in different ways influenced the trajectory—my ComDev accomplice and former Ørecomm co-director Thomas Tufte (now at Loughborough, but we are still making grand plans together); Gezi co-editor Hans-Åke Persson; Asu Aksoy in Istanbul (and Kevin wherever he may be); Johan Härnsten in Paris (and Per-Olof in Tuna)—but two "influencers" were more decisive than others for the conception of this book. Ivan Vladislavić, whom I first met in 1991, has been my principal South African reference point ever since, as interlocutor, advisor and inspiring example, as the outstanding writer he is. Incidentally, I also met Thomas Hylland Eriksen in 1991, at the Nordic Summer University's session in Hurdalsøen, Norway. In the years that followed, we were to co-coordinate a NSU "circle" on the *Globalisation of Culture*, which at the time was as controversial as it remains today.

[1]Hemer, Povrzanović Frykman & Ristilammi (2020).

The issues we discussed then, in the wake of an apparently brave new world, were very much the issues that I interrogate in this book, at an historical moment that apparently is the diametrical opposite to the optimistic 1990s (which parenthetically may have been the only moment that the South African transition could have happened).

Lastly, I bow with immense love and respect to my most merciless critic, Chinook, who has remained my life companion over almost forty years. She gave me the absolutely crucial advise for the completion of this endeavour: to be ruthless to myself.

Sandby, Sweden
September 2019

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# Contents

# List of Figures


CHAPTER 1

# Contaminations, Ethnographic Fictions and What-What

## On the Convergence of Literary and Academic Writing


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The texts that constitute this book intend to explore the possible merging of academic and literary practices. The aim is not experimentation for its own sake, but the search for a form—*forms*—that is/are congenial with the subject of interrogation: the world in transition, with South Africa as the main focal point.

What I least want is to "explain" my transgressive attempt by means of a conventional academic introduction. I regard this as a literary work as much as an academic one, and it is a golden rule that literary writers not attempt to analyse their own work, as such self-reflection runs the imminent risk of appearing as primitive or even irrelevant in comparison with the meta-level inscribed in the structure of the work itself.[1] The latter is never fully apprehended by the author (if it were, it would not be literature). Yet, my interrogation also aspires to stand the test of academic scrutiny, and for the sake of transparency, I will in the following make some preliminary reflections in order to provide a background and rationale for the *opacity*.[2]

*

The sudden outburst of xenophobic violence in South Africa in March 2015, which was even more virulent than the similar incidents in 2008, formed the backdrop of my three-month stay at STIAS, as did the parallel student revolt and symbolic battle about public memory—starting at the University of Cape Town and culminating with the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue from its campus on 9 April. Both these seemingly disconnected events informed my emerging interrogation, which had also been motivated by the rise of right-wing populism and neo-nationalism in Europe—manifest long before the refugee migration of 2015/16—and the ticking bomb of communal violence on the Indian subcontinent, which I had touched upon in a previous study.[3]

I claimed, as a hypothesis, that the underlying structure in the regularly resurging nationalism, xenophobia and identity politics, in Europe, South Africa and, possibly, everywhere, can be framed by the discourse of *Purity/Impurity*, as outlined and analysed by British anthropologist Mary Douglas 1966. Douglas theorized purity and impurity in terms

[1] Söderblom 2009: 64.

[2] I use the term *opacity* in Édouard Glissant's sense, which I elaborate on in the second part of the main text.

[3] Hemer 2015, republished in this volume.

of instantiation and disruption of a shared symbolic order. Simply put, purity conceals the preservation of that order, whereas all that threatens the social equilibrium is encoded as impurity. Influential, and disputed, as Douglas has been,[4] the purity/impurity discourse arguably holds an as yet unrealised potential for both social theory and social action. By way of the cross-genre and transdisciplinary methodology—finding a form that is probing in and by itself—my aim was hence to explore the phenomenology of impurity, and specifically the notion of *creolisation, for which* South Africa (counter-intuitively) is a very apposite case.

*

The project I first formulated at STIAS can be regarded as a sequel to two preceding projects that were partly carried out in parallel. In my artistic research project *Fiction and Truth in Transition*,[5] I used South Africa and Argentina as comparative cases to explore the relationship between literary fiction and society's dramatic transformation in the two countries over the past three decades. That interrogation brought me, to my own surprise, to the crossroads of literature and anthropology (fiction and ethnography), where this project starts.

After completing the artistic research project, which I defended as a dissertation in Social Anthropology,[6] I returned to fiction and wrote the concluding novel in a trilogy that I had begun working on in the late 1990s.[7] These two major long-term projects (academic and literary) definitely informed each other, and in retrospect I can clearly see how they were really two complementary forms of interrogating some common themes. Complementary, yet distinctly different. And, contrary to my preconception, the difference seemed to be emphasised rather than blurred as I moved between them—from the academic straitjacket to the freedom of fiction. Even though I had retained the perspective of the literary writer, and incorporated elements of essay, reportage and memoir, there was a limit as to how far I could challenge the format of the dissertation.

[4]When the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1995 listed the "hundred books which have most influenced Western public discourse since the Second World War", *Purity and Danger* was on the list, alongside the more expected works of Orwell, Sartre, Wittgenstein and others.

[5]Hemer 2012.

[6]Hemer 2011.

[7]Hemer 2014.

(For me, the principal challenge was to write an academic dissertation, not another novel.) And it was indeed a great relief to return to writing fiction.

The title of the concluding part of the Argentina trilogy, *Misiones*, had been in the back of my mind ever since I wrote the second part, and I would certainly have written it some five years earlier if the dissertation had not come in-between. But then, it would as certainly have become a quite different novel. On the one hand, the systematic research into the ethnographic and historical material that I was beginning to explore in the second novel (*Santiago*) provided my writing with a more solid ground. On the other, and more importantly, the subsequent greater confidence in my own authority enhanced my ability and motivation to *invent* more freely. For example, Misiones is a province in North-Eastern Argentina with a fairly large and largely unknown community of Swedish immigrants, who arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. I had been there twice, very briefly, and I was all the time planning to go back and do some proper ethnographic research for my novel. But that journey was always postponed and in the end I decided to write the novel anyway, almost completely based on imagination and hardly making use of any of the "real" history, let alone current ethnographic empirics. Hence, in the end, the *literariness* of my literary approach was actually accentuated.

So, what about *transgression*? To what extent do the academic and literary practices actually converge? Is it even desirable *that* they fuse into new genres? It would appear that the somewhat discouraging answer is "No". Moreover it may be, as Norwegian writer and anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen suggested already in the early '90s, that literature and anthropology are relevant to each other only as long and in-so-far as they remain aware of their fundamental difference.[8] And given the current fictionalisation of journalism and politics, with proliferation of "fake news" and *fact resistance*, it may no longer even be a discouraging conclusion. But the question of convergence has continued to intrigue me. This project is my second take on it, my implementation in practice, if you like. I have pursued it, well knowing that it may be a dead-end street.

[8] Eriksen 1994: 192. On my direct question, in a panel on "Writing Across Borders" at EASA in Tallinn, 2014, he admitted to having nuanced, if not abandoned, his rather categorical standpoint, which primarily had been motivated by his concern that aspiring anthropologists would too willingly adopt literary ambitions and inadvertently confirm the mocking epithet as "failed novelists" (ibid.: 194).

*

"In Praise of Contamination" is an intermediate headline in one of the chapters of Ghanaian American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*.[9] 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 most articulate contemporary proponent. In fact, he says little more about this supposed tradition. The only writers he mentions are Terence and Rushdie. I see it more as a tentative idea, in a category similar to Argentinean writer Juan José Saer's definition of fiction as "speculative anthropology",[10] and I am happy to take on the challenge of outlining and exploring this tradition—but possibly in another direction than Appiah intended.

There are of course innumerable examples in the two millennia between Terence and Rushdie. One key work would be Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721), a satirical novel that tells the experience of two Persian noblemen's journey from Isfahan to Paris. US American anthropologist James Clifford, one of the editors of the ground-breaking anthology *Writing Culture* (1986), defines ethnography as *hybrid textual activity*, traversing genres and disciplines, and traces its origin to the Greek historian Herodotus on the one hand, and "Montesquieu's Persian travellers" on the other.[11] Jorge Luis Borges' elusive *ficciones*, sometimes described as "fictional essays", would be another outstanding feature in this marginal canon (marginal in the sense that it thrives where the literary imagination is the most creative, at the limits of its extension). Borges famously coined the idea that an author creates his/her own predecessors, but I don't think he would have minded that we invented this tradition for him. After Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), contaminations have arguably proliferated even more. Chris Kraus' infamous novel *I Love Dick* (1997) is but one example, which I find particularly interesting, of what literary critic Joan Hawkins in the

[9] Appiah 2006: 111–113.

[10] Saer 1997.

[11] Clifford 1986: 2–3.

afterword labels *theoretical fictions*.[12] And, in fact, I would not regard Salman Rushdie as the principal contemporary proponent of *contamination* in my understanding—as a cross- or trans-genre between literary and discursive writing. My first candidate would be J. M. Coetzee, for whom the relation between the two writing practices has always been a crucial concern, and whose recent work, from 1999 and onwards, combines and even fuses the two formerly separate yet communicating practices, in more and less innovative ways. Coetzee made a short sojourn at STIAS during the time I was there. Our stays overlapped less than a week, but it so happened that we attended each other's seminars.

A possible contender, if he were still alive, would be Édouard Glissant, whose fusion of poetry and philosophy, *Poétique de la Relation* (1990) is the key reference for *Cape Calypso*, alongside *Purity and Danger*. Glissant was the mentor for the three Caribbean writer colleagues Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphael Confiant, who in 1989 proclaimed what became known as "The Creole Manifesto". *Éloge de la creolité* [*In Praise of Creoleness*] is a key text in the creolisation debate that preceded and informed the discussion on "globalisation", which *nota bene* did not emerge among economists or political scientists, but in cultural studies.[13] Incidentally, the Creole manifesto was parallel in time with *The Satanic Verses* and ayatollah Khomeini's subsequent fatwa against Rushdie, and although there are no explicit cross-references, Rushdie's essays (1992) reflect on many of the crucial concerns of the creolisation debate.

I probably wouldn't have thought of bringing Glissant and Coetzee together under other circumstances, but they do somehow meet in *Cape Calypso*, and their imaginary (mute) conversation is in my view perhaps the most surprising possible achievement.

*

[12] Hawkins in Kraus 2016 [1997]: 247. Kraus herself called an early manifestation of her genre-bending "Lonely Girl Phenomenology" (ibid.).

[13] The coining of the term "globalisation" is commonly attributed to US American cultural sociologist Roland Robertson, who defined it (1992) as "the compression of the world and the intensification of the consciousness of the world as a whole".

Although my dissertation abided to the academic rules, the Fiction and Truth project also had "literary" offspring. *Hillbrow Blues* was conceived while I was working on the South African part of the comparative study, more specifically on a chapter about "writing the city" (Johannesburg). It was a way of approaching the same material from a slightly different angle. The difference is the component that would be defined as fictional; the stream of consciousness, the subjective distortion of reality, and most importantly, the simple distancing device of the third person, which I added in the English version. Yet it remains ethnographic in the sense that it is conveying the experience of a *real* place. It's a condensation of many journeys, and with two registers in time, a now and a past, a before and an after; in this case, before and after the transition to democracy.

The sequel *Bengaluru Boogie* is similarly based on two temporal registers, a before and an after; the emerging IT metropolis of the first years of the new Millennium and the combusting mega city ten years later.[14] The breakneck feature of that text is the protagonist's change of gender. The "he" now becomes a "ze",[15] creating a compositional challenge, and by all means a disturbing difficulty, which adds new meaning to the term *third person*.

The *Cape Calypso* diptych takes the protagonist's transformation even further and definitely blurs, if not erases, the border between fiction and auto-ethnography. Here, the supposedly congenial form is elaborated as two distinct yet correspondent texts that run in parallel; one is a fictionalised report from "the Institute", in the present tense of March and April 2015; the opposite text is in the first part a close reading of *Purity and Danger*, and in the second a similar reading of *Poetics of Relation*.

[14] In fact, there are three time layers, as the "after" is viewed from the perspective of two different journeys, both in 2013, one of which is written in the future tense.

[15] This improvised turn was partly inspired by the recent introduction in Swedish of the neutral gender term "hen" (as between the masculine "han" and the feminine "hon"), which at the time had no officially recognised correspondent in English. In the original English version, I used the not quite adequate "s/he". When reading it a few years later, Cheryl Stobie suggested that I replace "s/he" with "ze", and also made me aware that this is a contested term with a number of contenders. Moreover, the common convention has lately become to use the—in my view extremely awkward—pronouns they/them/theirs for trans or non-gendered persons. My insistence on the invented ze/hir pronouns may not be a deliberate political statement, but I simply prefer them and have grown accustomed to using them.

The first part (*Impurity and Danger/Sounding Stellenbosch*) was largely finalised in 2015, during and shortly after my stay at STIAS, and I presented it in draft versions at the IAMCR conference in Montreal in July and at a workshop at Bard College Berlin in November the same year. The second part (*In Praise of Relation/Waiting for Señor C.*) is written at three years' distance from the frame story, in 2018 (in Pietermaritzburg and Paris). The two parts are (dis)connected by the *Interlude* (*Allesverloren*) which essentially was conceived after my revisit to the Cape in 2016. That year's journey is also the timeframe of the concluding *Melville Medley*, which although written after the diptych should be read as another interlude rather than as an epilogue, referring back to the Hillbrow Blues and thus closing the incomplete circle.

Both as a theoretical concept and as cultural practice, *creolisation* is in the common debate primarily associated with the Caribbean and, to a lesser extent, with Latin America (the *New* World); not with Europe, or Asia, and certainly not with South Africa, which in the second half of the twentieth century was the epitome of its negation: *apartheid*. But, as already hinted, South Africa provides a very apt case for cross-exploration, not only because its apartheid policy (1948–94) was one of the foremost large-scale applications of a politics of purity,[16] but also because that same policy of separation, which goes longer back than Afrikaner nationalism, was a reaction to and suppression of one of the world's epicentres of creolisation. Like the Caribbean, the Western Cape has literally been a cultural crossroads for centuries and is today in fact the region with the highest genetic variation in the world.[17]

The long-term relationship is a prerequisite for the multi-layered diachronic and synchronic perspective of whatever I choose to call this cross-genre (contamination, ethnographic fiction or what-what) with its elaboration of a tense that could be described as a future past.[18] I would not claim any "regional expertise" on South Africa (the very notion of regional studies is profoundly colonial), but I have a thicker experience

[16]The elective affinity between purity discourses and black-and-white worldviews (Duschinsky 2013: 72).

[17]Elmi Muller, STIAS seminar, March 2015.

[18]I owe that term to Juan José Saer, who skilfully uses the tense of the future past in his novels, for example *Glosa* (1986), translated to English as *The Sixty-Five Years of Washington* (2010).

with its complexity than I have with most other parts of the globe (the only contenders outside Scandinavia would be Spain and Argentina). And I have a historical perspective on the South African transition and post-transition that many—in fact, most—South Africans do not have. Twenty-seven years is more than a quarter of a century, and although the legacy of apartheid is still very tangible, and will remain so for decades to come, the South Africa that I first knew in 1991 is just as distant in time and mind as the German Democratic Republic.

But enough with preludes now. Let the contamination begin!

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