

'Zooming in' and 'zooming out'

We have suggested that anthropologists fashion their arguments by 'zooming in' and 'zooming out'. They 'zoom in' on specific incidents, events, things done and said, which are more or less written as real. Of course, they are not 'reality'. Reality is beyond and, crucially, *before* the words we write. Nonetheless, we do craft descriptions of things done and said which should be reasonably faithful to that reality and which we hope will be read as such.

Paloma Gay y Blasco and Huon Wardle, refer to these bits of writing as 'narratives of the immediate' (2007: 76–95). In evoking the notion of immediacy, they suggest that one of the hallmarks of anthropological writing is that it is grounded in a 'direct relationship or connection with something or somebody else' (Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2007: 78). Keith Basso's story of visiting Nate Thompson and working with two Apache cowboys stringing a barbed wire fence are just such stories. Keith Basso's article is not about Nate Thompson or cowboys stringing barbed wire fences. It is about Apache place names, or, more to the point, it is about the significance of places and place names to the Apache taken to be a cultural group.

Nonetheless, as we argue in the book, his argument needs these stories. It needs them as evidence to secure the plausibility of his more general claims about Apache culture and significance of place names. It also needs them as means to ensure the reader that he is not just spinning various theoretical fancies out of thin air. These stories make the claim that what the author is saying comes from 'a direct connection' with someone or something else – a real person, a real event, real words spoken – something that happened out there in the world beyond the page.

Perhaps, more idealistically, there is a third reason for telling such stories. As we argue in the book when discussing organising and analysing your data, the propositions you advance concerning the nature of other people's lives should emerge from, and be grounded in, the 'empirical material' which is, and can only ever be, the experience of being close to others, whether that is actually achieved by literally being amongst other

living breathing people, or coming close to them through the writings of others who have been amongst other living breathing people, or coming close to others in the traces they have left behind: a drawing on a cave wall, an old letter found in an archive and so on.

The arguments we fashion are, however, always provisional and somehow both excessive and insufficient to the 'weight of actual existence', to borrow a turn of phrase evoked in article by Bruce Jackson, who in turn is quoting from the writing of James Agee (Jackson 1988: 277). This does not mean that all arguments are equal. Some are better than others because they are based on better research or better analysis and are better communicated in writing. But it does mean that no argument, no claim, no interpretation, can take possession of and be the lives of others. Our arguments are fashioned in the friction between the work of abstraction, the academic requirement that we tidy up the chaos of experience and from it fashion an account that finds some kind of principle of order in that chaos, and the fact that reality goes on its chaotic way pushing against, possibly disrupting, the most well-crafted and plausible interpretations. In 'zooming in' and writing 'narratives of the immediate', we are evoking that friction and perhaps suggesting that life, the lives of others, exceeds our interpretations even as we render our interpretations credible in reference to our accounts of real people doing and saying real things.

In talking about some kind of connection with someone or something else Gay y Blasco and Wardle are mostly talking about a connection forged in the experience of 'being there' or doing ethnographic fieldwork and how we write descriptions fashioned from that experience into our finished works, be they articles, books or dissertations. However, 'narratives of the immediate', need not be fieldwork stories. They can also be stories found in the pages of other published works published by other credible authors. Or they can be stories found in archives. Indeed, another (fourth and final) important reason for telling your own fieldwork stories in your written work is that they become accessible to other scholars who can make use of them in fashioning their own arguments, so long as they properly cite you as the source of these accounts.

But, as we have already suggested, academic writing does not consist of a bunch of fieldwork stories, or transcripts of interviews, or collection of photographs. Even as we

'zoom in' upon the particular, and write of Nate Thompson and cowboys stringing a barbed wire fence while whispering place names, we also *zoom out* to fashion more general claims about human (and sometimes non-human) life cast in more general terms. We write what Bruno Latour has called 'panoramas' (Latour 2005: 189–190): accounts of lived reality that are greater than reality as it is lived. Culture is a panorama. So is society. So, indeed, is any abstraction or theorisation that is at once rooted, or claims to find expression in the immediate, tangible existence yet is itself intangible except as it is rendered tangible as this webpage or that book.

The panoramas exist at different scales. Some read as being very close to being real life, but rather than real life being written as a description of a particular moment in which particular people did and said particular things, it is written as an account of how a small group of people, usually the group of people who has somehow been gathered together by you the researcher during the course of your research, do and say things in predictable and patterned ways. So, for example, there is a passage in Keith Basso's 'Stalking with Stories' article in which he quotes Nate Thompson at length (in fact there are several such passages in this article). It is a complex passage, but basically Nate Thompson is saying that telling a story is like hunting. If this was the story of one Apache only, it may be interesting, but perhaps not the stuff of anthropology. But Basso then suggests he has spoken with other Apache from Cibecue, who have 'corroborated' the metaphorical association between hunting and story-telling (1996: 42). It may seem a slight shift. We may even think he is still engaged in the work of description, but really Basso is carefully advancing the proposition that for most of the Apache that he met while doing fieldwork in the community of Cibecue on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation in Arizona broadly, if not precisely, share the understanding of story-telling described in rich detail by Nate Thompson. A paragraph later he, quite subtly, 'zooms out' again and begins talking of the 'Western Apache' and arguing that not only do they share an understanding of story-telling as a form of hunting, but also, in the best tradition of anthropological theorising, this association reveals that historical tales have a purpose within this society and so do more than simply narrate events of times gone by. Specifically, they 'have the capacity to thrust socially delinquent persons into periods of intense critical self-examination from which ... they emerged chastened, repentant, and determined to "live right"' (ibid.: 43). No longer is he writing of real

people doing real things; rather he is proposing a 'model' which consists of set of 'general premises' (ibid.: 43). This model and these general premises are, as Basso makes clear, constituted in the process of anthropological research and interpretation and so are always provisional, although the plausibility of this model is, as he also makes clear, secured in reference to real people doing real things.

Anthropological argument, then, consists in this process of 'zooming in' and 'zooming out', whereby we shift scales from the particular to the general: from 'narratives of the immediate' to various kinds of claims and propositions concerning groups of people taken as a whole, up to, and including, the entirety of humanity. The question is: how do you compose these shifts in scale in writing?

This is an important question. For your argument to work, for it to be read as plausible and credible argument, the particular and the general need to be stitched together so that they seem to emerge from and relate to one another. If your bigger more general claims float unmoored from any narratives of the immediate, disassociated from any reference to real people doing and saying real things, then they will likely be read as conjectural and implausible. Conversely, if you tell a bunch of fieldwork stories but do not account for how these stories are relevant to and allow you to elucidate issues of great theoretical import, then your work will be read as anecdotal, journalistic and lacking scholarly oomph. What needs to happen, therefore, is not just that you 'zoom in' and 'zoom out', but in so doing you compose relationships between various claims, both great and small, and various bits of evidence.

Hanging out with meerkats (and those who hang out with meerkats)

To consider how we compose relationships in writing let us look at another example of anthropological writing. We could have chosen many fine examples, but we have chosen Matei Candea's paper about falling in love with Carlos the meerkat (2010). Candea's paper is about some scientists and volunteers (including the ethnographer) who are studying a colony of meerkats in South Africa.

Throughout his paper he provides some direct descriptions of interactions between humans and meerkats. He also provides some verbatim quotes from scientists and volunteers talking about interactions with meerkats. The meerkats remain silent on the matter, though their attitudes, disposition and reckless desire for eggs are also described in some detail. There are also plenty of times when Candea takes a step back and gives a more general overview of human/meerkat interactions and the habits and protocols that govern these interactions. Finally, there is a more theoretical discussion, which, to cut a much richer and more complex story short, seeks to advance the argument that when considering relationships between humans and non-humans we should consider 'detachment' as an 'aspect of relationship (not its negation)' (2010: 254). If we do so, this has implications not only for our understanding of the interactions between scientists and meerkats, or even more broadly human and non-human animals, but also for anthropology as a way of knowing other people. Too often, Candea argues, our debates about the ethics of anthropological understanding are polarised between those who argue for an ethics of engagement and those who argue for an ethics of detachment. If we understand these two positions as intertwined and emergent, rather than absolute and opposing, then we may consider the research process, whether it is with meerkats or our fellow humans, as situating an unfolding process of engagement *and* detachment (ibid.: 255).

You may or may not agree with Candea's conclusions, but his argument is quite beautifully composed. What is rather wonderful is how we move from talking about some volunteer talking of a 'fantastic moment' that very morning, when two meerkats 'foraged about' no more than six metres from the watching human (ibid.: 249), to a consideration of detachment and engagement and anthropological ways of knowing. This may seem a big leap. Some may even find the more philosophical turn that Candea's argument takes a move too far. But the argument reads seamlessly. We start with the general problem of engagement, disengagement and the interaction between humans and non-humans. Then we zoom a bit closer to describe the specific situation under study. Then we zoom closer still to describe particular meerkat and human interaction (or not) and how those who worked with meerkats talked of their interactions in the field. Then we 'zoom out' again to suggest that what is revealed in this talk is that the interaction between meerkats and humans features processes of

engagement and disengagement and, in particular, a curious quality of disengagement which Candea terms *inter-patience*, which is a term he coins to refer to a state of watchful distancing (ibid.: 249). This allows him to reconsider the notion of disengagement in our theorisation of relations between human and non-human and, by extension, between human and their fellow humans and so the project anthropology in general.

As we 'zoom out' from the specifics of what people did and said, Candea brings in literature to constitute the bigger and grander and more theoretical issues which lend bigger and grander and more theoretical significance to his study of people spending time with meerkats. For example, after a more ethnographic section where he provides detailed accounts of the goings on between people and meerkats, he suggests that he can return to the broader issue of 'habituation', which he discussed in theoretical terms in the introduction. He argues that his study allows him, and maybe the rest of us, to 'rethink what counts as "being with" and "being together"', and at this juncture not only does he introduce a series of broader concepts (habituation, being with, being together) but he situates these concepts within a broader literature by citing a number of authors (specifically 'Vicart 2008' and 'Smuts 2001: 306–307') (ibid.: 249). He thereby not only renders credible his move towards greater theoretical abstraction but also, as we discussed above, secures the academic relevance of his study.

In 'zooming in' and 'zooming out' you are constituting the significance of the specific doings and saying that you are describing by situating them within broader and more theoretically constituted discussions about, for example, the relationship between humans and non-humans and our ways of knowing. As we suggest when discussing writing in the book, it is important to remember that this process of 'zooming in' and 'zooming out' is not just, or even, a way of imagining research or analysing your findings. It is a way of composing your argument in such a way that your main claims will be read as emerging from and supported by your evidence.

As we have suggested, the key to this composition is the way you forge associations in writing. You do this by referring back and forward. You refer back to explain how what you are about to write leads on from that. Alternatively, or additionally, you refer

forward to suggest how you will proceed. For example, to return to Candea and his meerkats, when 'zooming out' from a detailed and specific discussion of the relations between human and meerkats to a more general discussion of habituation and inter-patience, he opens this section with following sentence:

This brief sketch of meerkat and volunteer socialities allows me to reframe my original question of habituation.

(ibid.: 249)

This seems a simple sentence but it does a lot of work. It connects what he is about to say about the bigger issues of habituation and inter-patience to his detailed descriptions of human-meerkat interaction. It also connects what he is about to say back to the theoretical problematic of engagement and detachment introduced at the beginning of the paper through a brief discussion of the literature concerning the relations between human and non-humans. So he 'zooms out', not through a sudden and jarring shift in scale and perspective but by keeping what has come before in view but expanding the scope of the discussion.

He does a similar trick in the section to follow in which he 'zooms in' to discuss the scientists, volunteers and meerkats:

For the volunteers, the cultivation of detachment and 'inter-patience' did not negate the sense of building a relationship with the animals.

(ibid.: 249)

Again this sentence seems simple but again it does a couple of important things. First, Candea looks ahead and tells his reader we will be shifting scales again to talk specifically about the thoughts and feeling of volunteers. Second, he looks back and, by referring to the 'cultivation of detachment' and 'inter-patience', which are key turns of phrase in his formulation of the problematic of habituation, he indicates how the specific discussion of the thoughts and feelings of volunteers relates to the overall argument that he is developing. He quickly zooms in even more closely to quote one of the volunteers at some length; however, because he carefully composes a network of

associations within which this quote is embedded we already know how it 'fits' into his overall argument.

One could map the entirety of Candea's paper as web of associations between narratives of the immediate and various panoramas composed at various different scales and level of theoretical abstraction. These panoramas are themselves composed of webs of association between Candea's claims and propositions and the writings of others who have contributed to our understanding of the relationship between humans and non-humans and so the argument, taken in its entirety, is clearly and explicitly relevant to anthropological scholarship related to these issues. All these associations are forged in writing and, in particular, by these little turns of phrase by which one element of his paper is explicitly related to another element. It is from these links that his whole argument is forged.

References

- Basso, K. 1996. 'Stalking with stories', in *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Amongst Western Apache*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 37–70.
- Candea, M. 2010. 'I fell in love with Carlos the meerkat: engagement and detachment in human-animal relations', *American Ethnologist* 37(2): 241–258.
- Gay y Blasco, P. and Wardle, H. 2007. *How to Read Ethnography*. London: Routledge.
- Jackson, B. 1988. 'What people like us are saying when we say we're saying the truth', *The Journal of American Folklore* 101(401): 276–292.
- Latour, B. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.