



Violence in Representation: an Ethnographic Reading of *El informe de Brodie* by Jorge Luis Borges

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Jorge Luis Borges published the ethnographic short story "El informe de Brodie" (Dr. Brodie's Report) in 1970, a year that foreshadowed the beginning of a new era in modern anthropology. In the early 1970s, critics and anthropologists such as Jacques Derrida (using structuralism) and Clifford Geertz (cultural anthropology) published essays that analyzed and critiqued traditional anthropological texts by ethnographers such as Levi-Strauss and Malinowski (see "Violence of the Letter", Derrida 1974 and "Thick Description", Geertz 1976). In "El informe de Brodie", Borges creates a fictional ethnographic description, purportedly written in the early nineteenth century by Scottish missionary David Brodie. It is a text that mirrors in many ways the typical traps of ethnographic imperialism of nineteenth century Europe discussed by Derrida and Geertz, as well as later cultural critics including Mary Louise Pratt and James Clifford. In this paper it is my intention to do a reading of the short story "El informe de Brodie" from the perspective of modern cultural anthropology, as if it were an actual nineteenth century document. I will work with theories, ideas, and issues raised by the aforementioned critics to explore the various layers of the report that use language and writing to advance asymmetrical power relations between the stereotypically imperi-

alistic missionary juxtaposed with the "savage" informant. In addition, I would like to consider how Borges undermines Dr. Brodie's ethnographic authority in a way that challenges the role of author, reader, and translator of a text by deliberately incorporating poorly constructed arguments and representations that force the reader to construct her own version of reality. In this way, Borges continues to explore the role of the reader/author of a text, explored in such famous fictions as "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quijote."

To begin, I would like to look at the manuscript in a general sense. In essence, what "Brodie" has produced with *El informe* is a 'thick description' in the Geertzian sense. Geertz explains his concept of culture, ethnography and ethnographic writing in this way: "The concept of culture I espouse is essentially a semiotic one. Believing...that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (238). He continues to explain that ethnographic writing is in fact a "thick description (because) what we call our data are really our own construction of other people's constructions of what they and their

compatriots are up to" (238). In the short story, Brodie produces a manuscript of several pages in which he attempts to give the reader a fully developed view of the previously unknown Mich tribe, from an undisclosed location in Africa. However, in spite of the fact that Brodie holds the title "doctor" (at least in the English text translated by Borges himself with help from N.T. di Giovanni), he is not an academic, and makes no attempt to supply the reader with an impartial account of what he has observed. Of course, cultural critics would point out that no one is able to give a completely impartial account of his observations. Nonetheless, in Dr. Brodie's manuscript, the writing is replete with his opinions and judgments of the "native" informants, and he strives to maintain a clear division between self and other throughout the account. Brodie clearly is not one of the modern ethnographers described in James Clifford's "On Ethnographic Authority." He is not interested in scientific participant-observation, or contemporary ethnographic writing. Rather, he is, to use one of Clifford's descriptions, one of "the earlier 'men on the spot,' the missionary, the administrator, the trader, (or) the traveller, whose knowledge of indigenous peoples...was not informed by the best scientific hypotheses or a sufficient neutrality" (27). Brodie wants to maintain an unattached position of superiority over his subjects, something he openly asserts to his audience. In spite of his efforts, however, a sort of minute transculturation does occur between Dr. Brodie and the Mich, a due directional flow of cultural influences that he acknowledges to an extent at the end of his report: "I will discuss this in more detail below."

The first thing I want to discuss concerning this ethnography is its origin and intention. It was found, presumably, among the pages of Lane's "Arabian Nights-Entertainment" (or *Mily una noches*, in Spanish). The review is dated from 1839, with handwritten notes in the margins that match notes written on the manuscript. However, the manuscript itself is not dated, and is missing the first page. The finder hypothesizes that it was written around the same time as the publishing of the multi-volume book, that is, 1839. We really have no way of knowing when it was actually produced. What we do know is that the manuscript, although it talks of its readers, (factores) in the first paragraph, is actually being addressed to a queen's government. As Mary Louise Pratt points out in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, in 1837 Queen Victoria ascended to the throne of England ready to codify what would be the European woman's Imperial Quest for excellence, the

Civilizing Mission" (171). Thus it would be logical to assume that the queen addressed in the manuscript is indeed Queen Victoria. This then would place the document in the same time frame as Lane's publication, in which it was found.

In writing to the Queen, Dr. Brodie asks her majesty to aid in the salvation of the Mich. Hence we have contradicting motives on the part of the author. On the surface he proclaims his intent to work in the name of Christianity to procure salvation for those "unfortunate," a typical goal for a nineteenth century missionary. However, at the same time we find him addressing his readers, plural. Obviously his aspirations go beyond reaching the eyes of the Queen. Brodie wants to reach readers, he wants to be published and read throughout Great Britain, and perhaps the Western Hemisphere. This hope to reach multiple readers, a barely masked hope for fame and glory, will taint the rendition he presents of the African tribe. Brodie repeatedly posits himself in a position of superiority over the Mich, or the Yahoos as he renames them, offering subjective admonishments of their customs and practices.

It is important to recall that the printed manuscript is in fact presented to the reader as a translation of the original from English to Spanish. Although the translator promises to be loyal to the original text, we cannot know for certain if the condescending tone and poorly constructed arguments are part of the original manuscript or produced by the translator himself, based on his own perspective. However, given Brodie's decision to rename the Mich as the Yahoos, we can safely conclude that Brodie himself imposed the position of self over other. Therefore, I will read the "translated" manuscript as though it faithfully reproduces the tone, language, and construction of the original.

Let us turn now to an inspection of the manuscript itself, the representation that Dr. Brodie offers us of the Mich, and in turn, of himself. The narrative begins in mid-sentence, stating: "de la región que interstar los nombres-monos (Apemen) tienen en su morada los Mich, que llamare Yahoos, para que mis lectores no olviden su naturaleza bestial." (OC, 249). From the first phrase it is clear that this is not an ethnographic report of an academic sort, but rather an opportunity for the author to demonstrate his superiority over the race of men about whom he writes. He distinguishes between the tribe with which he has resided (los

Mlch) and a certain group of men referred to as "apemen" (hombres-monos). However, both groups are presented as animal-like, with the apemen presented as "infesting" the region, and the Mlch requiring a new name, taken from Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, to remind the readers of their "bestial nature." It is curious that he should choose to call the Mlch "Yahoos" after Swift's tale, for in the original, the "bestial" Yahoos are actually human beings raised as beasts. This seems to demonstrate not the "bestial nature" of the Yahoos, but rather the effect that society's treatment of a population can have on that population. It becomes clear that Brodie positions the Mlch above the apemen, both from the tone with which he writes of the two groups (the little space he devotes to the apemen paints them as violent, animal-like, and not deserving of the Queen's mercy), and the fact that he bestows upon the Mlch a proper name - the Yahoos. While this is certainly a demeaning and derogatory name, the fact that he makes a point of naming them in the odd tradition of Swift with a capitalized proper name as opposed to simply referring to them as apemen demonstrates a certain degree of kinship that he feels for this group of people. He views them, at least in part, as human beings worthy of a proper name in the Western tradition. It is with an "imperialistic eye" however, that he sees fit to replace the given proper name of the community, Mlch, with one of his own choice.

In the essay "The violence of the letter: from Lévi-Strauss to Rousseau," Jacques Derrida discusses at length the underlying violence at issue with the proper name. Using structural linguistics to approach an anthropological essay by Lévi-Strauss (*Tristes Tropiques*, 1955), Derrida determines that there are three levels of violence inherent in the proper name. The first level, an "arche-violence" or "arche-writing," occurs at the time of naming. For our purposes, this would be the point at which Brodie replaces "Mlch" with "Yahoos." Naming is described as the originary violence of language (Derrida 112). By naming something, we are classifying it, inscribing a difference within the thing named, and thus splitting that thing in two: the original thing, and the named thing. In other words, by giving something a name, the original thing disappears and is replaced by the newly classified thing. By bestowing the Mlch with a western proper name, Brodie in effect succeeds in obliterating the Mlch as they were prior to his arrival. He has classified them according to his perspective as being inferior and bestial, and has written them into western language.

The second level of violence inherent in the proper name, according to Derrida, confirms the first level through the obliteration of the proper name (*ibid.* 112). Derrida is referring to a specific incident observed by Lévi-Strauss when he systematizes this violence, however we can easily note the presence of this secondary violence in Dr. Brodie's report as well. The issue of proper names is addressed briefly by Brodie, who points out that within the tribe, very few individuals have proper names. Rather than use a speech act to refer to one another, it is common for the Mlch to address each other by flinging mud or throwing themselves on the ground. In other words, The Mlch themselves prefer not to use proper names within their community. Rather, they have invented a sort of prelinguistic act of address that may be seen as "closer to nature" when considering the nature/culture debate. However, the "natives" are not in reality any "closer to nature" than Brodie when it comes to linguistic structures. The Mlch have indeed developed a language as well as a (forgotten) system of writing, described by Brodie as being quite complex, and different from any other of which he has knowledge. Thus the lack of proper names is best looked at from the Derridean perspective of violence discussed above. The rejection of such names may indicate the Mlch's desire to avoid self-obliteration through linguistic classification.

The third level of violence in the proper name, when discussing Lévi-Strauss, comes in the form of evil, war, indiscretion, deceit, and rape (*ibid.* 112). This violation can be seen in the simple fact that the Scottish missionary has invaded the territory of the Mlch uninvited, and has taken it upon himself to bring them to a salvation that they did not ask for, and most likely do not want. It is a violence we can see clearly one hundred and sixty years after the writing of the essay, as readers with an historical vantage-point. We know of the violence that occurred as the Northern Hemisphere colonized the Southern Hemisphere. As it exported its people as slaves, imposing language, customs, and religious practices onto these cultures in the name of progress. And so, this simple act of renaming the tribe, when considered from the perspective of Derrida, carries with it a long history of violence and deceit on the part of the giver of the name.

In his description of the tribe, Brodie commonly juxtaposes their practices and habits with those of westerners. In doing so, he postulates that the Mlch are not as wise as the Scottish. For example, he explains that he advised the Mlch

to move their housing to the cooler and safer regions atop a hill, using the defensive strategy of the Scottish clans. Yet they still preferred to wallow in the steamy marshlands, which were in prime position for an attack from their enemies. He does not consider that the Mlch may have their own legitimate reasons for constructing their housing in the valleys, and we as readers do not know what those reasons may be. As active readers, we will note that the "superior" clans of Scotland, in spite of their strategic defense system, were still beaten by the British, centuries before, in times of war. When we bring our historical knowledge to the reading, we in turn are able to question Brodie's knowledge of his own country's history and his ability to actually improve the lives of the tribe, who at this time seem to be defending themselves just fine. We begin to see more clearly that although he puts himself in the position of author, which in turn bestows upon him a degree of authority, we cannot trust this authority. It is up to us to reinterpret his writing on a deeper level if we want to gain a clearer understanding of the Mlch, and also gain an understanding of Doctor Brodie himself.

Further on in the manuscript, Brodie, while describing the practices of the Mlch queen, attempts to explain the tribe's inability to construct simple objects or understand simple concepts of causality. He writes: "Los ornamentos que he enumerado vienen de otras regiones; los Yahoos los creen naturales, porque son incapaces de fabricar el objeto más simple. Para la tribu mi cabaña era árbol, aunque muchos me vieron edificarla y me dieron su ayuda (OC2: 451)."

We readers are certain to find this description fascinating, as the concept of not possessing a memory of cause and effect and the inability to construct an object is quite odd to the western mind. However, at the same time, if we look closely at the construction of Dr. Brodie's argument, and the construction of his paragraphs, we will note that he too seems incapable of constructing a simple object, and that his own skill at enumerating cause and effect is quite lacking. The paragraph begins with an intention of describing the queen of the Mlch. He describes her physical appearance, then describes the ornaments that adorn her body, and enters into a discourse on her sexual practices. It is at this point where the construction of his object, the paragraph and argument he writes, falls apart. Brodie jumps from a description of the queen and her ornaments to the discussion of the tribe's inability to construct simple objects. He then continues with rhetorical questions that bear no

relevance to the preceding discourse. And finally he closes his paragraph with a description of the tribe's reaction to his beard. The confusion only mounts, however, with the brief paragraph that follows: "Son insensibles al dolor y al placer, salvo al agrado que les dan la carne cruda y rancia y las cosas fétidas. La falta de imaginación los mueve a ser crueles" (OC2: 451).

With these two paragraphs, Brodie once again unwittingly undermines his own intention to claim an ethnographic authority and achieve fame for his work. In attempting to exert a difference between himself and the Mlch by describing their inferior practices, he in effect demonstrates the similarities that exist between them: the inability to construct logical and sequential narrative histories, to demonstrate causality.

Returning to the manuscript, we find Dr. Brodie explaining to his readers the eerie powers of the Mlch witch doctors. The Mlch, apparently in conjunction with their inability to conceive of causality, have a defective memory. They are not able to make the connection between past and current events. The distinction between dreams and reality is not clear, and they have no concept of tribal history. Brodie, however, is oddly impressed by a strange and exciting power held by the witch doctors, the power of foresight: "Gozan también la facultad de la previsión; declaran con tranquila certidumbre lo que sucederá dentro de diez o quince minutos" (OC2: 451). He refers to this talent as a "curious gift" (un curioso don), and loses himself in wonder at the fact that while he can remember vividly an event that happened to him as a child, he should be so amazed at one's ability to see into the future. "Mucho he cavilado sobre él. Sabemos que el pasado, el presente y el porvenir ya están, minucia por minucia, en la profética memoria de Dios, en Su eternidad; lo extraño es que los hombres pueden mirar, indefinidamente, hacia atrás pero no hacia adelante" (OC2: 451-52). As readers of this text however, this amazement becomes laughable when we see the type of divining done by the Mlch witch doctors. They prophesize hearing a bird's song or feeling a fly buzz on their neck. Given the hot, marshy verdant climate in which they live, one has to assume that there is an abundance of birds and flies that will sing and buzz on a regular basis. At any moment, one could safely divine that within the next ten to fifteen minutes such an event will indeed occur. Dr. Brodie remains duly impressed however, and credits the Mlch with possessing a power he does not entirely understand. This is important when considering the assumed position of superiority in

which Dr. Brodie places himself in relation to the Mlch. This single practice of the tribe impresses him to the extent that he becomes more inclined to fight for their salvation. They seem to hold a power that can be understood only by God, and this, in the doctor's eyes, lessens their inferiority a bit. However, anyone with the slightest ability to reason will understand the fault in Brodie's logic.

When Brodie moves ahead to describe the language of the Mlch, one cannot help but wonder how a man of such limited abilities to reason is able to understand the intricacies of a language completely different from any he has previously encountered. It is true that contemporary Cultural critics tend to agree that the "new style" ethnographer can efficiently use a native language without 'mastering' it (Clifford 30). However, by this time, active readers will have dismissed Brodie's interpretation of Mlch reality and will have begun creating their own perspective of the community. When faced with deciphering the odd language and classifying system of the tribe, readers will have to abandon to an extent their own linguistic reality. According to Brodie, the Mlch language functions by having a word that suggests a general meaning rather than assigning it outright to signify an object or idea. For example, the word *nrz* suggests the idea of "dispersion or spots" (*la dispersión o las manchas*), and can be used to signify any number of things that have the quality of dispersion or spottiness. ("El cielo estrellado, un leopardo, una bandada de aves..." etc.) The words of the Mlch language change meaning depending on tone and context in a manner, Brodie points out, not unlike some words in the English language. However, it is not the English language, and I can use this linguistic phenomenon to support my earlier statement that the Mlch actively avoid the act of naming.

The Mlch language functions in a way that is never static. The nature of suggesting a meaning rather than assigning it allows the Mlch to escape the Derridean "violence of the letter." They do not name their objects with linguistic signs, rather they allow that sign to sway the listener toward an understanding of the communication. Enough non-linguistic signifiers to accurately convey a thought or idea accompany this communication. We can assume a similar process occurs with the limited use of the proper name discussed earlier in this paper. The Mlch again avoid self-obliteration with evasive naming practices. In spite of the fact that Brodie claims to have developed enough of an understanding of the Mlch language to describe it in structural detail, he is unable to make any deeper

connections regarding the Mlch language or perception of reality, and the violation that occurs when he attempts to impose his reality over them.

Brodie also briefly mentions the Mlch writing system, evidence of which is found inscribed in the heights of the plateaus. The Mlch, however, are unable to decipher these inscriptions, and we cannot know for certain if it is indeed part of their history, or remnants of a different tribe from the area. Perhaps the tribe's defective memory resulted in the loss of their writing system. In a situation similar to that of García Márquez's *Macondo*, it is possible that their inability to remember anything for longer than a day resulted in their loss of understanding of the symbols that make up their writing system. It is also possible that the loss or rejection of the writing system occurred first, and hence resulted in the formation of faulty memory.

It would be inaccurate, however, to claim that the Mlch do not in any way write, or that they are not affected by writing systems. I draw here upon a study by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his book *Tristes Tropiques*, and the reaction to this study ("Violence of the Letter") by Derrida. In a chapter of the book titled "A Writing Lesson," Lévi-Strauss proposes that writing is a prerequisite for the evolution of a civilization. During the course of the study, the anthropologist resides with and studies a tribe, the Nambikwara, that does not possess a writing system equivalent to that of western culture. As Lévi-Strauss supplies the individuals of the tribe with paper and pencils, the chief of the tribe takes it upon himself to use writing as a symbol of the power. The others, however, dismiss him and his "writing," as they understand that he does not in fact possess the skill to which he lays claim. After his study, Lévi-Strauss reaches two conclusions, both relevant to the reading of Brodie's manuscript. First, he concludes that writing is not a necessary stepping-stone to civilization and culture. Second, he points to the sociological power of writing, the power understood and used by the Chief of the tribe. I would like to address the latter conclusion first, in relation to Brodie and the Mlch.

Writing is a means to exert power and influence over others. The Mlch have forgotten their writing system, if indeed it was theirs to begin with. Brodie, however, writes them. It is he who takes the power of the written word and proceeds to write the Mlch/Yahoos into western discourse, exerting a power over them that they literally cannot understand. They will, however, be held accountable for that which he writes. If the Queen's government

finds them worthy of financial and spiritual salvation, the Mlch will find their land infested by missionaries, as well as schools, reporters, and other icons of western civilization. Some Mlch will be trained in the art of western writing, and will be expected to teach others, slowly wiping out traces of "pre-Brodie" society. It is also possible that the Queen's government would not attempt to help the Mlch, and that other readers could find the tribe deplorable in their customs. Perhaps more studies would be done, perhaps the Mlch would be sold into slavery. Either way, the inability of the Mlch to write themselves, or to comprehend Brodie's writing results in an imbalance of power that can only aid in their obliteration.

Lévi-Strauss's other conclusion regarding writing and culture, that writing is not necessarily a prerequisite to culture, can also be applied to the Mlch. On the surface, we are hard pressed to find any solid evidence of culture or civilization with this tribe. They cannot construct simple objects, they engage in violent acts of torture, and so forth. However, in the final pages of Brodie's manuscript, he reveals the tribe's affinity for poetry. As an oral practice, true poetry is seen as a gift from the gods. Once a man utters words that distinguish him as a poet, he is ostracized from the tribe. Hence, in their exaltation of poetic form, the Mlch do have Culture, without needing first a system of (western) writing.

On a final note concerning writing practices, I point out that Derrida suggests that the simple act of naming, of inscribing a difference between two things, is on certain levels a form of writing. In other words, one can write without producing etchings and symbols. Oral poetry, for example, is a form of writing. The Mlch's understanding of poetry's spiritual and celestial nature demonstrates that they not only have writing, but also that it is in some ways quite advanced.

In Dr. Brodie's closing paragraphs, he describes how he finally left the tribe and came to meet up with a Romish missionary working to convert tribes to the Christian faith. In a passage very similar to that of *Gulliver's Travel's Book Four*, he describes his encounter with el Padre Fernandes. In Borges' version, Brodie describes the feeling of disgust that came over him as he saw Padre Fernandez eat without covering his mouth, a reaction based on Mlch cultural practices. With this instinctive reaction, Brodie demonstrates that a small process of transculturation has occurred between himself and the Mlch. Within this ripe

contact zone, not only did he likely affect the tribe and its perception of reality, but he was affected as well by their customs and realities. This small detail negates traditional anthropological beliefs that cultural flow was uni-directional in cases of first contact.

I would like now to step away from the manuscript and its implied author and briefly conclude with a consideration of Borges' possible intentions in writing this story. Since he began publishing in the early 1920s, JLB has commented extensively on issues of authorship, the role of the reader, and the art of translation ("La postulación de la realidad", for example). Each of these issues must come under consideration when reading an ethnographic essay such as the one produced by "Doctor Brodie." Considering Borges' great talent in constructing complex narratives and realities, it goes without saying that the illogical structure behind the paragraphs and arguments of Dr. Brodie is intentional. Borges demands that readers be active. In order to achieve a level of understanding beyond the blatantly superficial, readers must be critical of the implied author, they cannot take his words at face value. In fact, at some points, they may not want to take his words at all. It is up to the reader to in fact write the story on many levels, to deny the implied author a position of authority within the text. The reader must keep in mind that she is looking at a representation of reality that in fact has gone through many levels of translation. As described earlier, there is the reality itself, as lived by the Mlch tribe, the reality they translate so that Brodie can better comprehend what he observes. We then have the translation by Brodie himself of this perceived reality, presented to him through gestures and the Mlch language, which he in turn translates into the English language. He further translates his experience as he inscribes it into a western discourse. The manuscript he then produces in the early nineteenth century is found in the middle to late twentieth century and translated into the Spanish language. At each level of translation, some degree of authenticity is lost. The reader must remember that what she is devouring is not the Mlch reality, but rather an already dead simulacrum of this reality.

In conclusion, in "El informe de Brodie" Jorge Luis Borges has created an ethnographic thick description that managed to address Derridean issues of structural linguistics and power before Derrida himself actually published his work on these issues. It seems to comment on Cultural Anthropology in a way that supports research later

done by Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, and Mary Louise Pratt. The short story can also be read on many layers as a commentary on traditional Borgesian topics such as the role of the reader, author and translator, as well as the importance of poetry. It is a story that rewards the active reader with a rich web of new realities, and one that proves Borges once again to be ahead of his time.

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