

# Perception of the seen and unseen world

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# PERCEPTION OF THE SEEN AND UNSEEN WORLD

## A Conversation with Paul Stoller

**Interview:** *Michaela Schäuble, University of Bern*

In June 2019, Paul Stoller taught a four-day workshop entitled *Weaving the World: Writing Evocative Ethnographies* at the University of Bern. The technique of “weaving the world”, according to Stoller, denotes the seamless linkage of ethnographic description to social analysis. The evocation of space/place, character, and dialogue are strategies that ethnographic writers can use to ensure that readers come to know a place or the people who live in a particular place. During the course of the workshop, Paul Stoller outlined ethnographic writing (and blogging) practices and revealed some of the “tricks of the trade”. He encouraged the participants to begin to “weave the world” by writing descriptions of places as well as dialogues and character portraits, and to then combine them into a short ethnographic essay that captured in prose the texture of those elements as they are expressed during an event.

The idea to invite Paul Stoller for a creative writing workshop first occurred to us in the seminar “Anthropologists as Novelists” that I had taught in spring term 2019. In the course we – a group of very engaged MA- and two of my PhD students – read and critically discussed works such as: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston, *Return to Laughter: An Anthropological Novel* (1964) by Eleonore Smith Bowen (aka Laura Bohannan), Michael Jackson’s *Barawa*, and *the Ways Birds Fly in the Sky: An Ethnographic Novel* (1986), *The Jadu House: Intimate Histories of Anglo-India* (2000) by Laura Roychowdhury (aka Laura Baer), *Walter Benjamin’s Grave* (2006) by Michael Taussig, Lily King’s novel *Euphoria* (2014) and, finally, Paul Stoller’s *The Sorcerer’s Burden. The Ethnographic Saga of a Global Family* (2016). The course participants enjoyed examining how the diverse non-academic writing styles resonated with and spoke to real-life, existential scenarios and encounters.

This was when the idea arose to continue to read and write together as a group, and to experiment with various writing techniques ourselves. Generous financial support by the *Teach inspired!* scheme of the Faculty of Humanities and the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Bern enabled us to invite Paul Stoller and he kindly agreed to join us for a week. We opened up our initial seminar group to further participants interested in creative writing and assembled a highly motivated and talented cluster of MA-students, PhD candidates and post-docs; for four whole days, we sat together, wrote, read out what we had written and provided feedback on each other’s texts. Paul Stoller managed to create an environment that was characterized by mutual respect, trust and laughter.

Paul Stoller is an anthropologist and novelist who loves to listen and tell stories. He is a professor of Anthropology at West Chester University of Pennsylvania and has been conducting ethnographic research for more than thirty years. In his earlier work on the Songhay

in Niger, he focused mainly on aspects related to magic, sorcery and practices of spirit possession. In the course of his fieldwork during these years, he was himself introduced to Songhay sorcery as an apprentice and he keeps writing about his experiences thereof in various formats. From the early 1990s onwards he has also been pursuing studies of West African immigrants in New York City, focusing on cultural dynamics of informal market economies and the politics of immigration. In 1994 he was awarded a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship and in 2002, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) named him the recipient of the Robert B. Textor Award for Excellence in Anthropology. In 2013, Paul Stoller was awarded the Anders Retzius Gold Medal in recognition of his scientific contributions to anthropology, given once every three years by the King of Sweden. Additionally, for his public scholarship, he received the AAA's 2015 Anthropology in Media of Award.

So far, Stoller's work has resulted in the publication of 15 books, including ethnographies, biographies, memoirs, and a collection of his blog entries as well as three novels. He lectures frequently both in the United States and in Europe and is a regular contributor to newspapers and blogs.

The following conversation with Paul Stoller was conducted after the *Weaving the World* workshop. In my questions, I return to some of the key concepts outlined by Stoller during the workshop, mainly related to the key notion of "storytelling", but I also draw on some of his earlier works. Paul Stoller is often regarded as a predecessor of both sensory and also of the so-called ontological turn in anthropology. In confronting him with these attributions, I am rewarded with a story and a number of fascinating and somewhat surprising assessments regarding the current state of anthropological discourse. I then ask about his experiences with the publishing industry and the differences (or similarities) between academic and more creative or experimental writing styles. The conversation concludes with some private insights into Paul Stoller's own reading and writing practices.

## Interview

*Michaela Schäuble (MS): Paul, in your many books and texts you always intersperse critical analysis with personal reflection. But your writing is not just radically subjective, it also draws directly from autobiography. I was particularly moved by Stranger in the Village of the Sick (2004) that you call A Memoir of Cancer, Sorcery, and Healing. You write about your diagnosis with lymphoma, the ensuing chemotherapy and how your experiences as an apprentice of Songhay sorcery helped you to navigate the path towards healing. Do you think that all ethnographic writing is, or should be, autobiographical to a certain extent? Or autoethnographic – which term do you prefer?*

**Paul Stoller (PS):** For me, there is no one way to write ethnography. If you look at the sweep of the books I've been able to write and publish, you'll find a variety of genres – ethnographies, academic essays, memoir, biography and fiction. It is the texture of the ethnographic materials, at least for me, that shapes textual strategy and genre choice. When I've written about sorcery, a very private and powerful subject, my writing has been personal – prose that attempts to connect to the profound existential issues of fidelity and betrayal, illness and

health, and life and death. These issues compelled me to write memoirs (*In Sorcery's Shadow, Yaya's Story*) as well as fiction (*The Sorcerer's Burden*). Put another way, I don't think that all ethnographic writing is or should be overtly autobiographical. Even so, a person's subjective experience in the world invariably shapes textual construction.

*MS: In your text A Remarkable Convergence (2016) that is published in an online journal volume that I edited, you decided to insert many personal photographs, including a beautiful portrait of your mother. Is your use of personal photos a plea for transparency or authenticity?*

**PS:** I inserted personal photos, including one of my mother, because that essay, like the book *Yaya's Story* (2014), was intensely personal – a book about health and illness, love and loss, and life and death. The presence of those personal photos underscore, for me at least, the human vulnerability of the writer, especially one who is attempting to write a narrative about illness. The question of transparency or authenticity, though, devolves less from the presence or absence of personal photos, but from the narrative texture of an essay, book or film. Based on depth of story, readers or viewers know – and know rather quickly – if a work is transparent or authentic. If it is, they will usually turn the page or continue to watch. If it isn't, they are likely move on to something else.

*MS: What role do memories play in your work? Personal memories but also writing about memories?*

**PS:** Memories play a major role in my work. Much of my memoir writing is memory work – the reconstruction – albeit imperfect – of past events, some of which have been life changing, all of which have shaped in some manner the central narrative that I have attempted to put forward. Sometimes memories resurface suddenly. They may come in dreams or present themselves on a walk in the woods, through wetlands, or along a nearby beach. Sometimes, they come in very private moments that occur during writing “flows” – moments when you are so immersed in the present that you lose track of time. Those memories, which are often quite powerful, take a life of their own, find their voice, and “insist” upon textual inclusion. Writing about memories, then, produces new memories, which can contribute powerfully to a text-in-progress.

*MS: You have mentioned several times that one of your mentors is the French filmmaker Jean Rouch who also worked with the Songhay in Niger. Rouch once famously said that when he attended his first spirit possession ritual, he saw a dialogue between human beings and the spirits and he knew that the only way to study this was to make films. What role does filmmaking, or maybe more broadly, picture-taking play in your own ethnographic practice?*

**PS:** I would approach the question a bit more broadly. There are many ways to study spirit possession. As Rouch's oeuvre demonstrates, film is a fabulous way of attempting to understand complex phenomena like spirit possession, but so is a long-term apprenticeship, the personal implication of which can yield sensitive and faithful books and/or films. In my eth-

nographic practice, image-making includes film, photos, but also word-images. Although I haven't made films and I haven't written books like Ruth Behar's *An Island Called Home* (2007) in which photos shape the ethnographic narrative, my sensitivity to place and to the visual quirks of character stem from a deep appreciation of the image—in film, in photos, but also in words.

*MS: Walter Benjamin in A Short History of Photography (2015) writes that photography makes aware the "optical unconscious". Does such a thing as the "optical unconscious" feature in your work? Or would you extend that to all senses, not just the visual?*

**PS:** I would extend Benjamin's optical focus to a sensory one. Early during my fieldwork, I had a humbling lesson that involved the sensory unconscious. Still a skeptical doctoral student in the midst of his initial fieldwork in Niger, a healer, a man named Djibo, asked me to assist him. He was to attend to a pious Muslim man who appeared to be dying. The man, who claimed to be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammed – a sharif – had just returned from Niger's major hospital, in Niamey, where physicians told him that his condition was terminal. They sent him home to Mehanna – to die. As a last measure he called upon Djibo's pre-Islamic healing traditions. Maybe they would work? Djibo asked me to assist. We prepared a highly perfumed ablution and asked the man's wife to wash her husband with it. Then Djibo and I set out to find the man's stolen soul, the source, according to Djibo, of the man's potentially fatal condition. Djibo led us to a spot outside the village where women and children would separate millet seeds from their husks, the latter of which would be discarded to form small rounded mounds. Approaching one of these mounds, Djibo dropped to his knees and spread the husks for a few moments. Then he jumped up with great excitement:

- Did you see it?
- See what? I asked.
- Did you hear it?
- Hear what?
- Did you feel it?
- I felt nothing.

Djibo shook his head and provided a rude introduction to the sensory unconscious. "You look but don't see. You listen but you don't hear. You touch but don't feel. Maybe in 20 or 25 years you'll develop the ability to see, hear and feel the world". That moment compelled me to think deeply about how sensoria shape our perception of the seen and unseen world.

*MS: Already in 1989 you published 'The Taste of Ethnographic Things. The Senses in Anthropology and in 1997 Sensuous Scholarship. That makes you the forerunner of what today is widely referred to as "sensory ethnography". How do you see your role in this paradigm shift in anthropology? Do you still see embodiment as the existential ground of culture and self?*

**PS:** The body is the repository of our experience-in-the-world. It is reservoir of inconvenient personal and social truth. My rude introduction to the sensory unconscious compelled me to confront my own professional and personal shortcomings. That introduction has shaped

my expository orientation to sensuousness in sound, vision, sound, taste and smell – the elements that shape the texture and quality of our social lives. I was an early advocate of sensorial studies, but certainly not the first. The work of Walter Ong and especially Steve Feld’s wonderful writing and recordings shaped my own early work on the senses. Since then my approach to the sensory has been to evoke the senses through sensuous description and narrative, an orientation that I continue to propose. Other anthropologists who study sensoria-in-society, most notably David Howes, and Kathryn Geurts, have taken a more comparative and analytical approach.

*MS: Storytelling is pivotal in all of your works, no matter which genre. What do you think of films such as Robert Gardner’s *Forest of Bliss* (1986) or the more recent films that came out of the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard, which do not tell a story as such but intend to immerse the viewer in a different world or evoke an experience for the sake of experiencing?*

**PS:** I admire the artistry in Gardner’s *Forest of Bliss* (1986) as well as the technical mastery and creative scope of the SEL films at Harvard. But as a critic and a viewer, I, like my mentor Jean Rouch, am compelled to ask: “Where is the story?” To backstage the story is to neglect what Jerome Bruner called “the narrative construction of reality”. Stories and storytelling are central to construction of identity and to the flow of social relations. They shape the quality of social life. They enable us to connect with one another. If there is no story, what is there?

*MS: Your stories feature many non-human actors and entities. I am really curious what your take on the so-called “ontological turn” in anthropology is. It is very obvious in your writing that you take different perceptions of reality for granted. But would you consider these as different ontologies?*

**PS:** Oh boy! That question opens the Pandora’s box of theory-making in contemporary anthropology. I’ve made some strong categorizations of the new – and by now, not so new – anthropological ontologists. I referred to the “ontological turn” as the “ontological turn off”.

I have also called anthropological ontology “refried structuralism”. In retrospect those reactions are unfair to a group of thoughtful anthropologists who have commendably confronted important philosophical questions. From my vantage, the ontological turn caught fire several years ago and soon faded into relative obscurity. The importance of respecting the sometimes strange ontology of others cannot be underestimated. In that sense many anthropologists – even many of our ancestors – have long considered seriously the ontology of others in which “forests think” and in which scholars experience the sensory unconscious – unseen forces that shape social life. How do we account for the unseen, the imponderables of other worlds, the inexplicable? How do we write about or film that which, in the words of Jean Rouch in *Les maîtres fous* (1955), is “not yet known to us” The anthropological writing on ontology has been dense and unnecessarily obscure – anthropologists trying to think and write like philosophers, which, in the end hasn’t worked out so well. The more powerful expressions of ontology in film and text have been embedded in ethnographic

works that describe – without expository fanfare – the sensory unconscious. Among many classic examples one can include Marcel Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemmel* (1965), and Rouch's *Les maîtres fous* (1955) and *Tourou et Bitti* (1971). There is no small amount on ontology in my works on the Songhay – especially *In Sorcery's Shadow* (Stoller 1987), *Fusion of the Worlds* (Stoller 1989). In all these cases, ontology is evoked through visual or textual narrative. The evocation of ontology has a long history in anthropology and has been a central feature in classic as well as more recent anthropological works.

*MS: Your literary repertoire covers so many genres—from classic ethnographies, memoirs, essays, to journalism and blog entries—and you also write fiction. In 2016 your novel The Sorcerer's Burden. The Ethnographic Saga of a Global Family was published. In this novel you also draw on your experiences and knowledge as an anthropologist. What is the advantage (and disadvantage) of writing fiction as compared to a classic monograph?*

**PS:** Fiction and ethnography share many characteristics. Some of the greatest works of fiction are deeply ethnographic. Think of the ethnographic detail you find in the classic works of Balzac, Dickens, and Dostoyevsky or the more contemporary works of Kundera, Gordimer, and Atwood. All of my fiction is based upon ethnographic research. *Jaguar* (1999) is based upon my work among Nigerien traders in New York City. *Gallery Bundu* (2005) evolved from my ethnographic experience among African art traders – in New York City, Niger and Burkina Faso. *The Sorcerer's Burden* (2016) emerged from my ongoing study of sorcery. Fiction can be liberating. In it the writer can move inside the heads of her or his characters and express an inner dialogue. In fiction there is more space for the expression of emotion, more room for drama. In fiction there are fewer constraints – constraints that the linearity of ethnography imposes. Fiction can powerfully connect readers to the inner dimensions of human experience. The advantages of writing fiction include: (1) greater artistic and stylistic license in the description of place and space, more license to develop character and construct plot; (2) more capacity to connect with non-academic audiences. Many readers of *Jaguar*, for example, have been young African American women who live in large cities, where many of them have encountered West African immigrants. There are disadvantages to writing ethnographic fiction, a term I don't like because it implies that ethnographically contoured fiction is somehow “different” from “real” fiction. By the same token, ethnographic fiction is often not considered “real” anthropology. Fiction about traditional anthropological subjects gets very little play in academic contexts. There have only been a few anthropological reviews of my novels and they certainly do not get cited in the literature. Even so, if the anthropological ideas embedded in fiction circulate widely in the public sphere that eclipses the disappointment of academic dismissal.

*MS: What were your experiences with the publishing industry—as opposed to academic publishing?*

**PS:** My experiences with trade publishing have been disappointing. It took me some time to find a publisher for *The Sorcerer's Burden*. I wrote to scores of agents and a few of them took interest in the project. One senior agent liked the manuscript but wouldn't take it on. She re-

ferred me to another agent who passed it on to a “hot” junior agent who told me that I had real talent. Citing his discomfort with the “formalities” of West African dialogue, he, too, refused to represent me. Because he liked the project he passed it on to a colleague, who loved the book. But she worked with authors of youth fiction and said that she wouldn’t know where to place the work. In contemporary trade publishing it doesn’t matter what you’ve done in the past. What matters is how well will your project do in the present. Will it attract a broad readership and attract film or television producers? Will it make money? I have published with Beacon Press, which is an academically oriented trade publisher. They brought out my memoir: *Stranger in the Village of the Sick* in 2004, but didn’t really promote it, which is a shame because that work had the potential to help a broad population of cancer patients and their families. Academic publishers, by contrast, seem to care more for craft and story. Academic publishers also want bestsellers, but not if those works stain the reputation of the house.

*MS: I already mentioned that you also blog, you are on twitter, you have a Facebook account— how important are social media for you? Do you see yourself as a political writer?*

**PS:** Social media are very important to me. When I blogged for *HuffPost*, I wrote mostly about politics from an anthropological vantage. Having switched to *Psychology Today* (PT), I have changed the focus of my public anthropology from the anthropology of politics to the anthropology of well-being. My PT blog is called: “The Path to Well-Being”. In my posts I present non-western takes on health, existential balance, illness and death. In 2015 I published a book (co-written with my brother) called: *Climbing the Mountain: Cancer Exercise and Well-Being*. It was published in Germany and, like many books, this one received very little attention. The work is an anthropologically contoured guide to cancer diagnosis, treatment and remission. To get the message out about the existential contours of the cancer experience, I have been reworking some of the chapters and posting them on the PT platform, which means that thousands of readers are getting access to what could be important information about the socio-cultural parameters of chronic illness and well-being. These days social media platforms are important sites for the conveyance of scholarship, including, of course, anthropological scholarship, to the general public.

*MS: In 2019, your very first book In Sorcery’s Shadow: A Memoir of Apprenticeship Among the Songhay of Niger (co-authored with Cheryl Olkes) was translated into German as Im Schatten der Zauberer (2019). So far, the translation has been very well received, especially here in Switzerland and there are several positive reviews in daily newspapers.*

*Why do you think the publisher, Piet Meyer Verlag, has chosen this particular book? His target audience is not an academic readership, but a very broad and general audience. Do you think that it is the topic— your apprenticeship as a sorcerer in Niger— or your writing style that mainly sparks interest in readers?*

**PS:** My editors at The University of Chicago Press told me that Piet Meyer had long wanted to publish a German translation of *In Sorcery’s Shadow* (1987). He had read *In Sorcery’s Shadow* as well as my other works. In the United States, *In Sorcery’s Shadow*, which was pub-



## DEBATES

lished more than 30 years ago, is still being widely read and debated. This ongoing appeal may be linked to its subject – sorcery in West Africa. That same appeal could be linked to popularity of “coming of age” tales written in an uncluttered style. But I think a more profound reason for its ongoing appeal devolves from the vulnerabilities of character – the expressed fears and personal imperfections of me and the other characters in the text. Such vulnerability creates a textual connection between the writer and multiple audiences of readers, a connection that leads to edifying conversations and an expanding readership.

*MS: My last questions are mainly concerned with your own writing and reading practice and quite personal. When and where do you best like to write? And to read?*

**PS:** I always write at home. I have two lovely studies. One has a wonderful view of Rockford Park, which has an old growth forest where I walk every morning. The other study is in our basement – no view, but a comfortable space filled with photos and ritual objects. Despite these two wonderful spaces, I do most of my writing at the dining room table – a long, rectangular piece of furniture crafted from old wood. I do a good deal of reading at home on a comfortable leather chair in my living room. Depending upon my teaching schedule, I write in the peace and tranquility of mid to late morning or in the quiet of late evening. I try to write every day, but don't always succeed. In my office, which is spacious and offers views of the campus quadrangle and a wonderful magnolia tree, my reading and writing is limited to memos.

*MS: Who are your favourite writers? Is there also someone in academia, particularly in anthropology, whose writing you admire? What do you like about it in particular?*

**PS:** It is difficult to pick favorites. In fiction, I really like the playfulness of Italo Calvino, the depth of Milan Kundera, and the craft, skill and daring artistry of Nadine Gordimer. In anthropology I'm a big fan of Ruth Behar, who writes like a dream and tells ethnographic tales that make me think new thoughts and feel new feelings. I also admire the incredible writing of Katie Stewart, who has the rare capacity to produce uncomplicated prose about complicated subjects. I also admire the ever-expanding oeuvre of Michael Jackson, who brings philosophical finesse to ongoing discussion of the human condition.

*MS: Are there taboos for you, as in things that you would never write about?*

**PS:** Yes. In writing memoir, I attempt to protect the privacy of those closest to me. In my anthropological work, I will not expose secrets, of which there are many, that I have sworn to keep. In my academic critiques, I try to consider positive as well as negative aspects of a work that is under evaluation or in public review. In my view, every work makes some kind of contribution. Although some academic works merit extensive constructive critique, no work deserves to be trashed. For me, critiques should be used to create more collaboration in the academic community.

*MS: Thanks so much for taking the time to engage with the questions!*

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