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'Culture as a Verb' and 'Otherness': Reflections on Conceptual Threads from Brian Street's Early Writing

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Abstract:
This text re-examines the early and ongoing work of Brian Street and highlights the lasting relevance of Street's analysis of "ethnographic novels" presented in the book *The Savage in Literature: Representations of 'primitive' society in English fiction 1858-1920*. First, it presents an overview of Street's analysis of representations of 'primitive society' in "ethnographic novels", then, it identifies two conceptual threads – 'culture as a verb' and 'otherness' –, whose roots can be found in this book, and that Street continued to develop throughout his academic career. The paper argues that Street's early work speaks directly to those concerned today with examining power relationships in colonial and post-colonial contexts.

[**Content warning:** this article contains discussion of historical terms related to scientific racism from 19th and early 20th century literature]

Keywords: Social representation; Culture as verb; Otherness

Introduction:

It is almost five decades since the book *The Savage in Literature: Representations of 'primitive' society in English fiction 1858-1920* by Brian Street was first published. During these decades, political, social and educational movements challenging racial, gender and religious discriminatory ideologies have grown in number and visibility. By re-examining the early and ongoing work of Brian Street, readers of this volume can gain deeper understanding of the importance of his analysis of early "ethnographic novels" published in the period from 1858 to 1920 (Street, 1975; 2016). In this book, Street presented the results of his analyses of how scientific knowledge available at the time that these novels were written was used in the construction of narratives in which characters - heroes and 'savages' – were placed in opposition to each other; that is, Street's work shows how, in this new literary genre, heroes – European people – were made to reflect positions of members of what were considered highly 'developed' societies, in contrast to non-European people who were referred to as 'savages'. The reprinting of this book in 2016 speaks to the lasting relevance of Street's analyses of literature from an Anthropological perspective, which has provided a foundation for exploring similar issues across social sciences, including education.

Street's analyses of "ethnographic novels" were a seminal part of an intellectual movement within the social sciences that urged social anthropologists to take a reflexive stance to question ethnocentrism and universalist and binary epistemologies that had formed the basis of development of this discipline. As such, Street's work on the inscription of people in the novels is foundational for understanding processes involved in the construction of colonizing ideologies and "prefiguring later work by postcolonial scholars on Western constructions of the 'other'" (Maybin, 2017, para. 2). By tracing the roots of Street's analyses of "ethnographic novels" and how non-European people were represented in them, we suggest researchers today, concerned with how their work represent others, will want to examine Street's argument and analytic processes.

Through revisiting Street's work, researchers can gain deeper understandings of how non-European people were positioned in these "ethnographic novels". Additionally, researchers have opportunities to consider how the inscription of others in their own work, whether in research reports or novels, reproduces and/or challenges contemporary theories and social representations of people as presented in contemporary every day and

academic reproductions of the life world of people in social media, advertisement, movies, comics, novels as well as social and academic contexts. Thus, Street's goals of informing researchers in social anthropology and related areas of studies within anthropology (e.g., Heath & Street, 2008; Bloome et al, 2019) and other disciplines (e.g., education and other social sciences) have relevance on a global scale (e.g., Bloome et al, 2020; Prinsloo & Stroud, 2014; Kalman & Street, 2013; Grenfell et al, 2012; Robinson-Pant, 2005; Rogers & Street; Street, 2005). Street's early work speaks directly to those concerned today with examining power relationships in the colonial and post-colonial contexts. His challenges to ways of representing colonized people as culturally and racially inferior, led him, in his later work, to question how early anthropological representations of people contributed to research across disciplines on linguistic and cognitive deficit theories that are still present today and are visible in public policies (e.g., educational and literacy policies). In this paper, we seek to highlight the lasting relevance of Street's analysis of "ethnographic novels" presented in the book *The Savage in Literature: Representations of 'primitive' society in English fiction 1858-1920*. First, we present an overview of Street's study, then, we identify two conceptual threads, 'culture as a verb' and 'otherness', whose roots can be found in this book, and that Street continued to develop throughout his academic career.

Street's Analyses of "Ethnographic Novels": a Brief Overview

In *The Savage in Literature: Representations of 'primitive' society in English fiction 1858-1920* book, Street analysed "ethnographic novels" written by authors as R. M. Ballantyne, A. C. Doyle, H. R. Haggard, T. S. Elliot, R. Kipling, A. Lang, and E Wallace, among others. These authors produced a great deal of adventurous tales about people that lived in faraway lands and those that went to conquer them. The collection of books examined by Street represented a new literary genre extremely popular at the time of its publication. Many of these books were sold in large numbers, as it was the case, for example, of King Solomon's Mines by H. R. Haggard, a book that sold 31,000 copies during the first twelve months after being published in 1885. Such success demonstrates the huge interest on the part of British readers in the Victorian era in knowing about other civilizations and their ways of life. Thus, as Street argued, these novels answered the curiosity of many about what kind of people and civilization European travellers and conquerors were finding in faraway lands.

The use of the expression "ethnographic novel" was used by Street to make a distinction between this new literary genre and the 'penny dreadfuls', the first mass-produced novels, that were brought out in parts costing a penny each. Emphasising that the themes explored in these two genres were distinct, Street explained that:

> …the themes of these first mass-produced novels were domestic, and conventions grew up which restricted the author to a stereotyped pattern of events and characters in limited contexts (James,, L. 1963). By the 1870s writers were trying to break out of this strait-jacket. The growth of the empire of this time and the experience of so many travellers in distant, exotic lands provided a ready-made alternative, and from the 1870s onwards fiction took up this theme. The 'ethnographic novel', estranged in time and space from the claustrophobic Victorian drawing-room, became popular. For the first time, information on the other cultures, expressed in vivid, exciting tales, was available to the mass public of England. (Street, 1975, p. 4).

Street combined his background in language and English literature with his anthropological studies to examine how the representations of non-European people in these "ethnographic novels" were informed by scientific knowledge – theories of race, heredity and evolution – available at the time. He examined the links between theories produced in contemporary academic circles as well as by travellers and authors and argued that the kind of knowledge that was available to be read about non-European peoples derived from literature and science. In analysing this literary genre, which emerged during the period in which the colonization of other peoples living in Asia or Africa by the British Empire began, Street presented archaeological analyses of the ideological roots of social representations that still pervade various spheres of contemporary societies and are manifested in structural forms of racism.

In framing his analyses, Street took into consideration Evans-Pritchard's (1934) argument that ethnographic reports selected particular features of foreign people's lives and presented them as "representative of the whole in such a way that they were deprived of the meanings it derives from its social situation" (Street, 1975, p. 2). Departing from this argument, Street analysed "how, and to some extent why, particular aspects of 'primitive life' were seized upon by many English writers in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and taken as representative of the whole" (Street, 1975, p. 2). Through his analyses, Street demonstrated that the representations of 'primitive' peoples were derived from "outdated scientific theory and on the limited experience of travellers, many of them unsympathetic to other ways of life" (Street, 1975, p. 2). He disputed the

predominant view that "Imperialism" would be the sole force responsible for the production of distorted pictures of 'primitive' people disseminated in the nineteenth century, arguing that:

> … many of the stereotypes had already hardened before the 'scramble for Africa', and Imperialists tended to use theories already worked out by scientists and which lend themselves to political manipulation. Scientific theories of race provided a framework of thought with regard to primitive peoples which justified the actions of imperialists, but they arose not out of an imperialistic situation, but in pre-imperial world of science. (Street 1975, p. 5)

To support this argument, Street pointed out various movements that foregrounded the study of 'primitive' peoples. These included, for example, the influence of the Ethnological Society founded in 1843, political movements that questioned slavery which led to the foundation of the Anthropological Society of London, archaeological discoveries of the age, and Darwin's theory of evolution, among others. According to Street, these movements were associated with the acquisition of new colonies and contributed to the construction of a body of theories about "the way of life of the people of the colonies" (1975, p. 3). In the report of this analysis, he argued that "the combination of scientific interest in 'primitive' man with increased political and social contact with him, is reflected in popular literature of the day" (1975, p.3). Street (1975) stated that:

> There is a unity in the scientific thought of the period, based on common interest in evolutionary theory and racial theory and the nature of 'armchair anthropology', and there is a unity in the political interests of the time, in the concern with overseas territory and the eventual emergence of the Empire (Street, 1975, p. 4)

Street linked the historical roots of scientific theories of race to "traveller's tales from exotic lands in the contemporary framework of thought", arguing that this body of knowledge "became increasingly important in everyday social and political life" (1975, p. 3) of British people. In taking this reflexive stance, he demonstrated that such tales would tell more about the Victorians themselves than about the people they were describing.

In each chapter of his book, Street traced the relationships between fiction and scientific theories available at the time and how these theories contributed to the composition of 'primitive' people's representations in the novels and in subsequent research. For example, in Chapter 2, *The English abroad*, he provided various examples of how, in the novels, "the superiority of the Englishman and his heritage was constantly being 'proved' by the inferiority of other races such as the Negros (sic) and their lack of equivalent history" (p.19). A premise that, according to Street, was supported, by "the scientific racism of the day." In this chapter, the reader gets to know the types of travellers who provided tales, and the stereotypes of travellers and natives portrayed in popular fiction. Street argued: "in most novels of the time, however, the writer and the English heroes they portray merely remain fearful of what they cannot understand in other societies" (p. 37). As he further argued:

> By thinking of home, re-creating home customs and cherishing their inward-looking world, the English abroad could not but see the natives through ethnocentric spectacles. Popular fiction both presents the consequences of this viewpoint in dramatic manner and depicts the situation which gave rise to it. Whereas the descriptions of the natives are often distorted, those of the English society are likely to be more accurate since the writers themselves belong to it. (Street, 1975, p. 37)

Through his analyses of "ethnographic novels", Street demonstrated how this ethnocentric perspective was the basis for the emergence of the intertwined but conflicting myths of the 'noble' and 'ignoble' savage. In Chapter 3, *Evolution and race in popular literature: classification, scientific and fictious*, Street (1975) argued that the natives are so often servants in popular literature because the authors believed this was scientifically ordained. In this chapter, Street followed "some of the tributaries of Victorian thought of race, as they flowed into the mainstream of the nineteenth century imagination and as they are presented in the pages of contemporary fiction" (1975, p.50). The cultural and scientific themes examined in Chapter 3 are related to theories of classification of mankind and criteria used for classification, addressing how the black population is characterized in popular literature. Street argued that the novels presented a binary opposition between whites and blacks by means of "oversimplification of characters and interpreting internal qualities from physical appearance" and in doing so, simply "adopted the principles of nineteenth century racism" (1975, p. 61). This led to characterizing the 'savage' as inherently child-like, gullible or faithful, in opposition to Europeans as knowledgeable, having physical strength, military organization, and, thus, as powerful.

These themes are further explored in subsequent chapters. In Chapter 4, *Evolution and Race in popular literature: hierarchy and racial theory*, Street traced how hierarchical classifications on the bases of race would justify and support the attribution of "a 'character' to different races of mankind … to determine the place, even the value,

of each race in a universal hierarchy" (1975, p. 79). Anthropological knowledge produced during the Victorian era, Street argued, would support the establishment of an ideal model – the European Man – as the foundation for evaluating the presence or the absence of classifying characteristics, i.e., beliefs, religion, political, social, and economic organization. Alien societies were then classified as less or more developed, according to their resemblance to the European model.

In Chapter 5, *Heredity and Environment*, Street focused on stereotypes built on the evolutionary doctrine of transformism formulated by Lamarck (1809), which assumed that "external circumstances modify the way of living and create new habits and necessities which bring about a change in the structure of organs" (Penniman, 1935, cited in Street, 1975, p. 106). This theory supported ways of constructing characters in the novels that were grounded in the belief that the qualities that natives have developed were "those needed to overcome their environment," (1975, p. 111), which were "tracking and skill in bushcraft" (1975, p. 111). Street also pointed out that:

> The widespread acceptance of the theory that 'cultural characteristics' can be inherited genetically is an important source of many nineteenth-century representations of other peoples. For some, 'culture', 'race', 'nation', etc. were interchangeable terms. (Street, 1975, p. 106)

In chapter 6, *'Primitive' politics in popular literature*, and in Chapter 7, *'Primitive" religion in popular literature,* Street analysed how occidental travellers contributed to the negative perception of institutions of colonized peoples, that is, non-Europeans, especially those from the African continent. In these chapters, Street concluded his analysis by highlighting characteristics of the novels that demonstrate how the English popular writers gave imaginative life to theories of transformism, race, and heredity as they presented these theories to lay people through stories full of vivid characters and exciting adventures. Street further argued that such vivid narratives would fuel and feed the perception and understanding of 'primitive' societies and their people as representing earlier stages of human development.

In this brief overview of Street's analyses of "ethnographic novels", we re-examined his arguments about how the development of scientific theories and cultural themes of interest to Victorians were intertwined with and produced from movements and encounters among explorers, colonized peoples, writers, and readers. As Street made transparent through his ethnographic analyses of this literary genre, the authors of these novels created particular representations of 'alien' people. By tracing Street's argument across the chapters of his book, we made visible elements for understanding how his analyses of "ethnographic novels" responded to calls within Social Anthropology in the UK to question ethnocentrism and binary epistemologies. In the next section, we consider how the theoretical concepts of 'culture as a verb' and 'otherness' (Hallan & Street, 2000) were further explored by Street and others in subsequent works over the next five decades, after the publication of his first book.

Highlighting Conceptual and Analytical Threads in Street's Academic Work

Space does not allow for presenting a comprehensive analysis of Street's engagement and contributions to a broader intellectual and activist agenda over the decades following the publication of *The Savage in Literature: Representations of 'primitive' society in English fiction 1858-1920 (Street 1975; 2016)*. However, in the remaining sections of this paper, we provide a brief overview of core concepts that have contributed to intellectual movements on a global scale at the intersection of social anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and other disciplines (e.g., literacy, education, and mathematics). These intellectual movements have challenged ways of representing marginalized, colonized, working class, non-white, and ordinary people as inferior to the dominant society of white, European and Western heritages across disciplines (Castanheira & Bloome, 2020).

To illustrate the impact of Street's conceptual arguments grounded in his seminal analyses of "ethnographic novels", we now highlight two concepts that have driven his work: 'culture as a verb' (Street, 1993; Heath & Street, 2008) and 'otherness' (Hallan & Street, 2000). Although these concepts were not explicitly articulated or named as such in Street's 1975 book, we argue that the roots of these concepts and ideas can be found in his analyses of representations of 'primitive' societies in literature. Further, we argue that the reading of his analyses of "ethnographic novels" supports understandings of how the concepts of 'culture as a verb' and 'otherness' are intertwined; that is, they are two sides of the same coin.

At the center of understanding these two intertwined concepts is a reformulation of the notion of 'culture'. Street addressed this issue in a presentation entitled *Culture is a verb: Anthropological aspects of language and cultural*

processes at the 24th Annual Meeting of the British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL). This presentation was then published in a special issue on Language and Culture, edited by Graddol, Thompson and Byron. In this paper, Street (Street, 1993) examined how various anthropologists have used and conceptualized the term culture and pointed out how anthropologists were becoming:

> …acutely self-conscious in their use of the term culture, worrying about its neo-colonial, racist and nationalist overtones. Rejecting the notion of fixed inheritance of shared meanings, they prefer, as Robert Thornton argues, to ask not "what culture is" but "what culture does. (1993, p. 23)

From this perspective, Street (1993) further argued that:

> …we tend to believe the categories and definitions we construct in an essentialist way, as though we had thereby found out what culture is. In fact 'there is not much point in trying to say what culture is'…what can be done, however, is to ask what culture does. For what culture does is precisely the work of 'defining words, ideas, things and groups…we all live our lives in terms of definitions, names and categories that culture creates. The job of studying culture is not of finding and then accepting its definitions but of 'discovering how and what definitions are made, under what circumstances and for what reasons'. (…) Culture is an active process of meaning making and contest over definition. This, then, is what I mean by arguing Culture is a verb (1993, p. 25).

Years later, Street and Heath (2008) would continue this discussion arguing that culture should not be thought of as a noun – a fixed thing, but as "unbounded, kaleidoscopic and dynamic" (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 7). From this perspective, culture is conceptualized as always in development, and thus, understandings of culture lead to the need to examine what *culture does* to a person or group of people as they move across settings, sites, and everyday contexts, and the consequences of *its doing* for people's lives.

Reading *The Savage in Literature* book, one can recognize that early in his career Street was already exploring and expanding the understanding of 'culture as a verb' and the consequences of its workings in naming and classifying people and societies. As demonstrated above, he had argued that processes of classifying and naming non-European characters were also expressed in the way these characters were socially positioned by western societies in the novels. Further, Street's analyses made visible how these novels popularized and naturalized such representations, contributing to processes of structuring power relations among peoples as they constructed and assigned identities, defined what counted as being, knowing, and doing from an ethnocentric perspective. To illustrate how the understanding of 'culture as a verb' was central to Street's work throughout his career and how he and colleagues further examined processes of social representation, we comment on two of his publications, the books *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Street, 1984) and *Cultural Encounters representing "otherness"* (Hallan & Street, 2000).

In *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (1984), Street's retheorizing of literacy was derived from a detailed, long-term ethnographic study of daily social practices of ordinary people in an Iranian rural village. In this book and other publications, Street describes how people used written language across domains of their lives (e.g., education, family, economic, religious). This ethnographic research also involved the examination of the relationship of the village to the government, international agencies, and the government's educational efforts to bring literacy to this population. From the point of view of people living in urban areas and working in government and international agencies (e.g., UNESCO), these rural populations were seen as non-literate and *bi-savod* (local term). The expression *bi-savod*, Street argued, referred to lack of knowledge in general, not merely lack of knowledge of and from written language. Grounded in this belief system, governmental and international agencies argued that improving the literacy level of villagers in relation to western literacy represented in books was the primary way to improve and develop that society in order to enrich their economic and cultural resources. Thus, their educational policies were focused on the introduction of western forms of schooling and learning, failing to recognize local knowledge and literacy practices.

In a presentation in Brazil to the Centre for Literacy (CEALE), at the School of Education in the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil, which was subsequently published in Portuguese, Street (2010) talked about his ethnographic research in Iran. He explained that as an ethnographer living in the village, observing and engaging with the villagers allowed him to conclude that there were a lot of literacy practices going on in that space. Grounded in this ethnographic work in the village, he formulated three sets of literacy practices (commercial, religious and schooled) that were developed by villagers, demonstrating the range of literacy practices they had. These same villagers were seen by some outsiders (e.g., government and international agency

workers) as empty vessels, and the village itself as a non-literate or empty space (i.e., a blank slate). Such views, according to Street, were based on western Eurocentric views of literacy as forms of written languages.

In the same presentation, Street (2010) stated that he also examined the academic literature to locate descriptions of the nature of literacy that reflected presuppositions, beliefs, and/or stereotypes of 'primitive' people as non-literate. His analyses of academic literature on writing led him to identify that such beliefs stemmed from theories of social evolution still guiding some anthropologists, and whose values, or assessment criteria, were held in relation to who counted as being literate.

After revisiting these arguments, as authors, we learned that across these two studies (Street, 1975 and 1994), Street held constant the examination and comparison of *social representations* produced in academic circles and policy levels as well as more generally, within and across texts read by people in different social settings. This is clearly similar to the *Savage in Literature* book, where he examined what people were reading and thus social representations of foreign peoples circulating among British people. Street also demonstrated how these social representations were informed by power relationships among peoples. In his ethnographic study of literacy practices in a rural village in Iran, Street again examined social representations of so-called literate and non-literate societies and their people in academic work as well as within and across local social contexts.

In *Literacy in Theory and Practice (*Street, 1994), such examinations led Street to retheorizing the meanings of literacy as context dependent, challenging the predominant *autonomous* model of literacy. This autonomous model of literacy conceived literacy as a set of invariable cognitive skills that, once learned, would have effects on other social and cognitive practices as well as contribute to the development of the individual (Street, 1984). Those adopting this perspective on literacy believe that these skills alone would transform the life of any person who acquires them, independently of their social and economic conditions. In contrast to the autonomous model of literacy, Street posited an *ideological* view of literacy, in which he argues that "literacy not only varies with social context and with cultural norms and discourses (regarding, for instance, identity, gender, and belief) – what might be termed 'social' model – but also that its uses and meanings are always embedded in relations of power" (Street, 2016, p.337).

Street's contrastive analysis of social representations and their production across social spheres as a way of understanding *cultures in the making* were further developed in an edited volume intitled *Cultural Encounters: Representing 'Otherness'* (Hallan & Street, 2000). This volume collected papers based on a seminar series at the Graduate Research Center for Culture and Communication (Culcom) at the University of Sussex, in 1995-96. This seminar series reunited participants from various disciplines, e.g., anthropology, art history, media and film studies, literary, and cultural studies. These interdisciplinary seminars resulted in discussions "characterized by the critical and constructive examination of various media employed to represent cultures by academic and museums institutions" (Hallan & Street, 2000, p. xiii). Hallam and Street stated that

> This book explores and analyses cultural encounters to expose the diversity of ways in which 'otherness' has been constituted, communicated and transformed in contemporary and historical contexts. The complex processes of othering, crucial in the formation of identities in Europe and beyond, are investigated here through the analyses of social representation understood as both an epistemological and a political issue. (Hallam & Street, 2000, p. 1)

From this perspective, in this book, the authors examined the ways in which visual and textual forms operate in the treatment of "cultural difference and explore further how 'otherness' provoke fundamental questions with regard to the nature of social knowledge, an issue of particular concern to contemporary anthropologists" (Hallam & Street, 2000, p. 1) and other disciplines, e.g, applied linguistics, education, and sociology (Sito & Mosquera, 2021; Szundy, Castanheira, Green, 2020; Santos, 2019; Bloome et al, 2018; Castanheira, Street & Carvalho, 2015; Carter, 2007; Hall, 1992; Spivak, 2010; Zavala & Córdova; 2010).

Final Comments

In this paper, we revisited Street's early work in *The Savage in Literature: Representations of 'primitive' society in English fiction 1858-1920* and argued that the concepts of 'culture as a verb' and 'otherness' stemmed from his analyses of "ethnographic novels". We also illustrated how Street and his colleagues have further developed these ideas in responding to calls within and across disciplines to take a reflexive stance to question ethnocentrism and universalist and binary epistemologies that formed the basis of knowledge produce about "others" within social anthropology and other academic disciplines. We argued that Street's analyses have created a foundation for

understanding the need to step back in order to learn from the other and reflecting on how we are going to represent this learning process in our own writing. His work has made visible the pragmatic, social, and intellectual resources people draw on as they develop their daily lives within and across social domains.

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