

Semiotics in Anthropology and Ethnography

Sally Ann Ness and Steve Coleman

Introduction

The story of how semiotics, broadly defined, has emerged and evolved along multiple trajectories within the sub-disciplines of anthropology can be and has been told in many different ways (Mertz 2007; Singer 1984; Sebeok 1969, 1986; Sebeok, Hayes, and Bateson 1964; Sicoli and Wolfgram 2018).¹ The present narrative will proceed along a somewhat unusual path in its attempt to tell one portion, the cultural anthropological portion, of this complicated story. It will track the history of what has been explicitly recognized as “semiotic anthropology” (as opposed to “symbolic” or “semiological” or “structural” or “semiotics in” anthropology), and it will do so specifically with regard to research in the sub-discipline of socio-cultural anthropology.² In so doing, it will briefly take into account the emergence of biosemiotics within anthropology as it has influenced ongoing research in socio-cultural anthropology.

This focus may well be judged overly narrow by some, given all that the term, “semiotics”, broadly defined, has come to mean and to interrelate within the discipline. The broader, all-inclusive meaning of the concept, the one that anthropologist, Margaret Mead, advocated for in 1962 when she became the first to recommend the interdisciplinary use of the term “semiotics” (Sebeok 1986; Sebeok, Hayes, and Bateson 1964; Mertz 2007), has more often served as the

¹ This review is focused primarily on semiotic anthropology which takes a Peircean orientation; See Sedda and Padoan (2018) for an overview of Continental semiotic traditions in anthropology.

² Particularly in the American context (to which this essay in the main stays confined), the discipline of anthropology is comprised of the subdisciplines of biological/physical anthropology, linguistic anthropology, archaeology, and a fourth sub-disciplinary area dedicated to the study of human diversity in living human populations transmitted via means that are social and learned. This fourth sub-discipline has acquired different labels in different geographical regions and intellectual schools of thought, the most common being “social” and “cultural” anthropology. This essay will employ the phrase “socio-cultural anthropology” with the intent of referring relatively inclusively to the entirety of anthropological work in this fourth sub-disciplinary area.

central focus of essays such as this one. It has been a focus that typically has led into intricate discussions of competing definitions, along with their respective intellectual legacies and their various applications and findings. The present strategy is adopted to serve an alternative purpose. It is intended to throw into high relief the pivotal role that semiotic anthropology, *narrowly* defined, has played and continues to play in relation to the discipline's broader history of theory and practice in semiotic anthropology *broadly* defined. The strategy is also meant to illuminate how semiotic theory, both narrowly and broadly defined, has manifested as a salient and influential approach to the study of human cultural diversity precisely in moments when disciplinary paradigm shifts of major import have been in the early stages of unfolding, moments when what might count as the "leading edge" of anthropological theory and inquiry has not been easy to identify. By narrowing the focus in this way, a clearer understanding of the relationship of semiotics both broadly and narrowly defined to the larger sub-discipline of socio-cultural anthropology may be forthcoming.

After providing a somewhat extended introduction to the disciplinary context that set the stage for semiotic anthropology's arrival, the chapter will survey what will here be termed the "main wave" of socio-cultural anthropological research that was produced under this rubric, a wave that waxed and waned during the 1980s and early 1990s. In the third section of the essay, work that has characterized a more recent, second wave of semiotic anthropology, a wave that is still largely potential in its formation, will serve as an additional focus of discussion. Together these movements track into the present moment the co-evolution of socio-cultural anthropological practice and semiotic theory as they have adapted to the ongoing transformation of the social sciences from its mid-twentieth century "Interpretive Turn" through the late-century "Culture Wars" and into the current era of twenty first century post-humanism.

The emergence of "semiotic anthropology": The disciplinary context

The study of humankind's semiotic endeavours, that is, of all that humanity has found or made meaningful, and of the myriad ways in which it has managed to convey and elaborate such findings and makings, has been of central interest to the discipline of anthropology from its earliest days. In the comparative investigations of such foundational figures as James Frazer ([1890] 1981) and Lewis Henry Morgan ([1878] 1985) concern with phenomena that at present would be classified

unambiguously as semiotic – communicative systems of myth and kinship reckoning, ritual practices and paraphernalia, traditions of architecture, exchange, and written and oral literature to mention only a few – are not only apparent, but motivate and guide inquiry. One sees in the pioneering British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor’s initial anthropological definition of the concept of “culture” a focus directly on the workings and contents of such sign phenomena as art, moral codes, and legal systems, and on their social acquisition as well ([1871] 1973: 63).³ Indeed, the further back one goes in the history of the discipline, the more the idea of a specifically “semiotic” anthropology seems redundant. In all its constituent subdisciplines, the distinctly human story of sign creation, assemblage, manipulation, evolution, conflict, transmission, and diversification has been at the heart of what has mattered most to anthropological theory and practice.

In this disciplinary regard, the explicit use of the qualifier “semiotic” to define a subfield of research within the discipline of anthropology has occurred in order to reference, not the recognition of new subject matter, but the application of new theoretical frameworks and methodological tools to subject matter already thoroughly explored from other perspectives. It is crucial, then, to note what preceded “semiotic anthropology” proper within the discipline when it actually did arrive, so as to appreciate how the intellectual stage was set for the theoretical framework that it was to introduce. This setting shaped and continues to shape – some might say mis-shape in certain respects – anthropology’s distinctive socio-cultural applications and theoretical explications with regard to the semiotic of Charles Sanders Peirce insofar as that semiotic can be seen to define this particular disciplinary field.

The “empire of grammar” in anthropology

The year 1923 saw a missed opportunity for establishing a genuinely semiotic anthropology. Ogden and Richards’ *The Meaning of Meaning* included a “supplement” – Bronislaw Malinowski’s essay, “The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages”, and an appendix featuring a description of Peirce’s semiotic and selections from his late correspondence with Lady Victoria Welby. In *The Meaning of Meaning*, Malinowski, Ogden, and Richards, although

³ Tylor’s definition of culture reads, “Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” ([1871] 1973: 63).

hampered by functionalist and evolutionary assumptions, struggled towards a truly triadic semiotics. Malinowski's contribution, written from the perspective of an anthropological fieldworker, included both a critique of the scholarly conceit of "the empire of Grammar", as a putatively autonomous realm of purely linguistic form, and a strong argument for the investigation of language use in context, prefiguring both the critical investigation of language ideologies (Schieffelin, Woolard and Kroskrity 1998) and the ethnography of speaking (Bauman and Sherzer 1974). As a fieldworker, Malinowski had a finely developed sense of language-in-use as a means towards social ends – as one utilitarian object among others in the "savage" toolkit. But his evolutionary and psychologistic bent precluded recognizing the possibility and desirability of a unified semiotic framework with which to describe human culture in general, encompassing "civilized" and "savage" thought as well as linguistic and non-linguistic cultural forms. The relativist linguistic anthropological tradition stemming from Boas and Sapir had meanwhile overcome evolutionary biases, developing an ethnographically rich account of the interanimation of linguistic forms and social life, but, for its own reasons, avoided developing any cross-culturally generalizable descriptive/analytic system for human culture as a whole. It was left to Malinowski's "Grammarians" – in a tradition extending from Saussure through Bloomfield and Chomsky, to develop a powerful, formal, descriptive system, based on a dyadic semiotics featuring the unity of abstract sound-patterns and mental concepts, which became the dominant model for human language, thought, and culture in the Twentieth Century. This "empire of Grammar" featured a clearly demarcated disciplinary object, not consciously accessible to the speaking subject but objectively observable by a detached, impartial analyst. It was immensely attractive as a scientific model, but in spite of Saussure's hopes that it could form the basis of a general semiotics, it proved problematic as a tool for understanding human social life. Nonetheless, the model of autonomous grammar, and its methodological after-image, in which unitary, bounded, "languages" seem to be reflexes of similarly demarcatable "cultures" or "societies," was influential in structural-functionalist-derived anthropology from the 1950s until the 1980s. This model also provided the possibility of an anthropological linguistics based on the Saussure-Bloomfield legacy. Descriptive linguistics afforded anthropologists working in any location in the world the methodological and technological means to document and record, dissect, analyse, and classify what were now referred to as "field languages" (Burling 1984) – even and especially those languages for which no written traditions existed. Field languages could, from this point onward be understood as isolatable

objects of cultural inquiry, suitable for comparative analysis. The new capacity forthcoming from this development – the capacity to *specialize* exclusively in the anthropological study of linguistic objects that this theoretical/methodological/technological apparatus made knowable, produced a class of experts of a particular language-centred kind within the modern discipline of twentieth century anthropology.⁴ In its most influential guise – that which generated the “etic/emic” distinction (Pike 1967), so widely disseminated both within and beyond the discipline of anthropology during its cognitively-oriented period⁵ – this model defined linguistic signs as minimal “units” of significance constituted by contrasting relations, asserting that a sign’s identity was entirely a function of binary oppositional markings evident only within the linguistic system in which it was employed. This theoretical perspective, instituted with regard to the study of human language – language here assumed to be the quintessential form of all sign phenomena and uniquely human in character – was firmly entrenched by the time of semiotic anthropology’s arrival.

Lévi-Strauss

Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist revolution in socio-cultural anthropology effectively extended the theoretical perspective previously applied specifically to linguistic signs to the whole of what comprised the subject matter of socio-cultural anthropology (and much of archaeology as well). “Culture”, anthropologically speaking, was defined by Lévi-Strauss as a closed system of internally definitive, binarily oppositional relations of significance whose relationship to biological (“natural”) aspects of life was arbitrary as far as any governing influence on the signs’ formal or conceptual character was concerned (1963). Initially, Lévi-Strauss made this case specifically with regard to kinship reckoning, where he demonstrated that the “natural” kin grouping, which he took to be the nuclear family kin group (mother, father, and their children), was not in actuality the fundamental *cultural* kin group, which he argued, through comparative analysis, to be a group that necessarily included male kin on the mother’s side as well. What he

⁴ Ironically, much of the opposition to this model came from within the field of linguistic anthropology itself (e.g., Hymes 1967).

⁵ “Etic”, derived from the term “phonetic” refers to a universal view point such as that of in the International Phonetic Alphabet as it categorizes the whole array of sounds that are used in languages worldwide, while “emic”, derived from the term “phonemic” and refers to a culture bearer’s learned perspective of functionally significant sounds used in a given language.

found to be true of kinship, Lévi-Strauss quickly extended to all of human social relations. All were argued to be governed by the cultural equivalent of *langue* in the case of language: that shared, finite, rule-governed system of comprehension-creating relations that in the case of culture formed a system, not of grammar, but of myth. Lévi-Strauss's structuralist revolution served to reinforce and re-establish the structuralist model of the linguistic sign as the standard theoretical perspective on human sign phenomena generally deeply embedding it in the anthropological definition of culture.

The complex role of Jakobson and the rise of linguistic anthropology

Lévi-Strauss' structuralism stemmed from a misapprehension of Roman Jakobson's linguistics, being based on the phoneme – the only level of language structure which involves binary oppositions between forms which aren't meaningful in and of themselves. Jakobson was a key figure in both the rise of structuralist sign theory and in the project of its disassembly. Already in 1950 Jakobson identified the role of the context of utterance, as manifested in indexical signs, within the system of grammar itself (Jakobson 1971). Jakobson noted the pertinence of several Peircean concepts – especially the icon/index/symbol trichotomy and the classifications of Interpretants – for researching human cultural forms, including language, and he appeared to recognize the importance of the triadic nature of Peirce's semiotic. Nonetheless, he regarded Peirce as a "structuralist," (Jakobson 1977) but in Jakobson's own particular sense of structuralism, which included various triadic aspects which he claimed were fundamental to the nature of Saussurean grammar itself, e.g., the role of the Interpretant in phenomena such as markedness (Shapiro 1983; Andrews 1990). A few of Jakobson's students led efforts to apply Peircean semiotic concepts to linguistic phenomena, consolidating the new field of linguistic anthropology out of the Boasian legacy and in contrast to a grammatically-centred "anthropological linguistics" (Silverstein 1976). Peircean categories were partially abstracted from their original theoretical context, becoming powerful analytic principles (iconicity, indexicality, etc.) with which to investigate the relationships between language in use and its wider contexts. There followed several decades of important research in which the "broader contexts of verbal utterance" (as Malinowski had put it) were found to be limitless, and language use itself, increasingly understood as an integral part of consequential human action, was found to be constitutive of those very contexts. As the field has matured, researchers have become more adept at situating language use within a broader cultural

semiotics (see for example, Stasch 2003), and there is some movement towards the articulation of general semiotic theory in a Peircean vein, e.g., Gal and Irvine (2019) who use an altered terminology motivated by a strict disciplinary focus (e.g., “conjecture” for Peirce’s “Interpretant”).

In tracing the Jakobsonian legacy within linguistic anthropology, we have gotten a bit ahead of ourselves. Linguistic anthropology developed in parallel to and influenced what we term below “the main wave” of semiotic anthropology, but has only recently become explicitly semiotic within a relatively Peircean framework, and its influence on the rest of the discipline is only now becoming significant. At the time the term, “semiotic anthropology,” with its reference to Peircean semiotic theory, began to appear in the anthropological literature of the 1970s, structuralist linguistic theory, as developed in the work of Saussure and Bloomfield, was firmly in place to broker its admission, not only with regard to the subject matter of linguistics, but with regard to the subject matter of socio-cultural anthropology as well. This situation would have critical consequences, with regard to what aspects of semiotic theory would be emphasized when it was imported into the discipline, and what aspects would largely be ignored or even misrepresented. Semiotic anthropology’s sign theory, in other words, was destined to be read by socio-cultural anthropologists, in relation to, and generally through the theoretical lens of structuralist semiology. Even after the discipline embraced interpretive social science theory in the 1980s (Rabinow and Sullivan 1979) and structuralist anthropology was deemed thoroughly defunct, only influential in its “post” guises, nonetheless this structuralist approach remained the received wisdom of the day insofar as semiotic anthropology was to be concerned.

More will be said below about exactly how this legacy of structuralist sign theory shaped the anthropological understanding of Peirce’s pragmaticist sign theory when it was eventually introduced into the discipline under the label of semiotic anthropology. However, before moving on to this topic, it is worth pausing momentarily to consider, as one looks back on this particular disciplinary history, that the arrival of this semiotic into the discipline of anthropology was relatively late. The arrival of semiotic anthropology might well have occurred much earlier – actually a full century earlier, given that its theoretical framework was in existence, at least in its early phases, from the 1860’s onward and was well known to philosophers, including the philosopher, John Dewey, who was a close colleague of one of American cultural anthropology’s founding figures, Franz Boas. This theoretical framework was fully elaborated to its final stages by the 1910’s, nearly sixty years before any of its concepts were first adopted into anthropological

studies. Had this theory of signs arrived in anthropology when it was newly minted – that is *before* the emergence of the twentieth century developments of descriptive linguistics and the subsequent structuralist revolution – the history of the discipline of anthropology in its entirety, and certainly the identity of linguistic anthropology as it related to socio-cultural anthropology, might well have been substantially different. However, anthropology did not so discover this semiotic when it was itself “breaking news.” Its discovery, rather, was motivated instead by a decline that gave opening to the interpretive movement in the discipline, along with its reinvention and valorisation of ethnography. It is to this moment and this movement that we now turn in earnest.

Semiotic anthropology: The main wave

The use of the explicit label, “semiotic anthropology”, dates to the late 1970s, and most directly to the pathbreaking work of socio-cultural anthropologist, Milton Singer (Singer 1978, 1980, 1984). In 1978, in a publication that appeared first in Thomas Sebeok’s edited collection, *Sight Sound and Sense*, and reappeared in Singer’s 1984 landmark volume, *Man’s Glassy Essence*, Singer called for a “semiotic anthropology,” connecting this phrase specifically and explicitly to the pragmaticist sign theory of C.S. Peirce. Given the philosophical density and logical complexity of Peirce’s thought, as well as Peirce’s lack of overt work in or reference to the social sciences generally (in high contrast, it might be noted, to the other leading pragmatists of Peirce’s time, Willam James and Josiah Royce), this call was an extraordinary feat for an anthropologist to undertake. Singer was, perhaps, uniquely qualified to make it. His doctoral training in philosophy, in particular his understanding of formal logic, and his intensive work with G.H. Mead during a period when Mead himself was focused on pragmatic dimensions of human communication prepared Singer as no other cultural anthropologist of his time to read Peirce’s semiotic comprehensively and with deep philosophical understanding.

Singer saw Peirce’s semiotic as the approach that could complete what he recognized as an ongoing paradigm shift of historic proportions occurring in the social sciences. These disciplines, in his view, in recent decades had been collectively moving away from methodological and theoretical approaches grounded in the empirical sciences in which the objects of scientific inquiry were conceived of and studied from fundamentally atomistic orientations. As the social sciences entered into their full autonomy and modernity in the twentieth century, Singer saw them adopting relational models of social and cultural phenomena, developing approaches that, in their very

reliance on relationality rather than objective discreteness as the theoretical and methodological basis of inquiry, were understood to be more appropriate to primordially social phenomena. The growth of research focusing on symbolic and otherwise communicative phenomena in anthropology that began occurring beginning in the 1940s, and which “exploded,” as he characterized it (Singer 1980: 486), in the 1960s, was part of this transformation, giving rise to the broader field of “symbolic anthropology” (1980: 486, 1984: 32, 72), as well as fuelling Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist revolution.

While this paradigm shift was well underway by 1978, Singer noticed that it was hindered by limitations inherent in the relational models it had employed, specifically those grounded in the dualisms of Saussurian semiology. While these approaches served well enough to enable a shift to relationality with regard to the study of the macro-phenomena of “society” and “culture” – two of the three main foci of the social sciences in Singer’s view (1980: 486) – it had proved inadequate, with regard to the third foci, that is, to the study of “the self.” The self, socially constructed, presented certain insurmountable problems for structuralist social scientific approaches stemming from the fact that the self included the micro-phenomenological dimensions of subjective and bodily experience, learning, and meaning-making. Dualistic models could not, in Singer’s view, effectively articulate and integrate into macro-social and cultural relational processes such micro-phenomenological components. To complete the transformation of the social sciences so that they might effectively base all of their forms of inquiry in relational method and theory, Singer called for the introduction of the triadic relational theory of Peirce’s pragmaticist semiotic. Peirce’s sign theory, with its close alignment to phenomenological philosophical approaches, possessed the capability in Singer’s view to deal comprehensively and realistically with the elusive third member of the social science triad, the social and significantly phenomenological self.

The case that Singer made for this triadic Peircean advantage, both within the discipline of anthropology and beyond, was grounded in a recognition of both Peirce’s early and later writings. It began with a close examination of some portions of the 1866 Lowell lectures and moved all of the way through to Peirce’s post-1903 letters to Victoria Lady Welby. Singer drew not only from Peirce’s semiotic triads, in particular, the icon/index/symbol triad, but also, and with masterful philosophical understanding, from Peirce’s broader theory of the universal categories. Singer’s explication of Peirce’s semiotic and his comparative analysis of its triadic relationality, which Singer contrasted with what he termed the “dyadic” structuralist theories of Lévi-Strauss and

Edmond Leach among others (1984: 42), set a standard for Peircean semiotic explication that arguably remains unsurpassed within the discipline of anthropology until today. His primary concern was to show that the triadic relationality Peirce recognized in the semiotic “self” – that is in the semiotic sign considered as a self – led to a definition of the self as inherently processual, dialogical, social, and public, a definition that did not equate the self with an individual organism or empirical body, even while it recognized the significance of the self’s involvement with corporeality and organismic life experience. In this way, Singer championed Peircean semiotic theory as the means by which the social sciences in general and anthropology in particular could at last fully engage and integrate the social scientific study of the self into the larger whole of social scientific inquiry, remaining true to the fundamental micro-phenomenological aspects of the social self while at the same time illuminating their relations to collective social structures and processes.

Singer was not alone, of course, in this effort. Among the anthropologists he acknowledged in developing his call were prominent figures in symbolic and linguistic anthropology such as Clifford Geertz, James Boon, Thomas A. Sebeok, Michael Silverstein, Melford Spiro, and M.N. Srinivas (1984: xiii). As Singer’s work was developing, leading anthropologists of art and ritual studies, such as Roy Rappaport (1979), Stanley Tambiah (1979), and Nancy Munn (1973), among others, also had turned to various aspects of Peirce’s pragmaticist sign theory as well. Rappaport’s study of what he termed “the obvious aspects” of ritual bears special mention here, as he employed Peirce’s semiotic to develop an evolutionary theory of ritual that was comparable to Singer’s work in its efforts intervene in and move beyond the limitations of prevailing dyadic approaches employed in structural anthropology. Rappaport focused on the habit-taking character of ritual practices, which communicated merely by the voluntary participation of those involved the acceptance of the social commitments therein entailed. Peirce’s processual orientation enabled Rappaport to diagram in given cases of ritual practice how social relations were understood and enacted performatively rather than through the media of doctrine or canonical (linguistic) communication (1979). While Rappaport’s and various other applications of Peirce’s semiotic served to further extend and refine the scope of symbolic anthropology, however, none set forth as clearly as Singer’s call the programmatic advantages of the Peircean approach for the overall advancement of the discipline’s progressive shift to fully anti-Cartesian relational method and theory. In this regard, it was largely Singer’s vision that provided the theoretical and topical

foundation for the work that for the next two decades was to follow from this initial main wave of semiotic anthropology.

The body of research that issued forth after Singer's call focused predominantly on various forms of what Singer had identified as "cultural performance" a label he adopted from the ethnographic work of anthropologist, Lloyd Warner on public festivals (1963). The main topics of inquiry focused on public displays of symbols, whether in ritual or secular contexts, that were considered to be emblematic of given ways of life, endeavouring to show precisely how these performance processes achieved their meaningful ends in relation to their diverse socio-cultural and historical contexts.

As it happened, Singer's call for a semiotic anthropology came at a critical moment for the larger field of symbolic anthropology, which by the late 1970s had come under increasing fire within the discipline, both for its failure to yield the universal laws of cultural symbolism that its prevailing structuralist semiological approaches had promised to deliver and also for what were increasingly viewed as the neocolonial politics of representation that structuralist anthropology's very mission appeared to espouse in its intent to articulate determinative symbolic patterns of which cultural subjects were unaware and evidently unable to articulate for themselves. Semiotic anthropology's emergence and development, in this regard, provided a pragmatic alternative to carry symbolic anthropology forward out of this structuralist predicament. It aligned effectively both with an "interpretive" turn the discipline was taking away from structuralism, as well as with the rise of the movement within socio-cultural anthropology championing decolonizing orientations to inquiry and which supported the sub-discipline's growing interest in becoming a form of anti-imperialistic "cultural critique" (Fischer 1984). With regard to the former, the interpretive turn, particularly as it was articulated in the influential work of symbolic anthropologist, Clifford Geertz (1972), created, among other things, a new and central role for ethnography in the subdiscipline of socio-cultural anthropology. Ethnography, being the form of anthropological practice and representation in which in-depth, participant-observation methodology was employed for the purpose of providing detailed, comprehensive accounts of given traditional ways of life, was inherently set up to enable the inclusion of a plurality of subjective voices and perspectives as opposed to providing a reductive universalist argument. In this interpretive ethnographic regard, the emergence and evolution of semiotic anthropology in socio-cultural anthropology, with its capacity to recognize and represent the experiences and

interpretations of various selves involved in its research, became a viable analytical support for interpretive ethnographic approaches. Likewise, in its definition of the self as fundamentally dialogic, public, and social, a definition that applied equally to the subjects of anthropology as well as to its ethnographers, semiotic anthropology, employed strategically, avoided the charges of neo-imperialism to which structuralism had fallen prey.

The work of E.V. Daniel well exemplifies these features of semiotic anthropology's main wave. Daniel produced two major works in semiotic anthropology during this period. Each work adapted Peirce's semiotic to the prevailing trends of its respective decade. The first, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*, appeared in 1984 at the height of the interpretive turn. The second, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence*, appeared in 1996, when anthropology as cultural critique was well established and a shift to large-scale, globally focused research was also underway as well. *Fluid Signs* carried forward the interest in the social, dialogic self, analysing a variety of cultural performances traditional of the Sri Lankan Tamil ethnic group. Peirce's semiotic was employed to analyse and describe these performances as they were experienced by Tamil subjects and by Daniel himself in dialogue with them. *Charred Lullabies*, in contrast, examined manifestations and subjective experiences of violence occurring in relation to the Tamil/Sinhala conflict in Sri Lanka during the 1980s and 90s, following the movements of the subjects of violence beyond the boundaries of Sri Lanka into English and American contexts. Peirce's semiotic in this context was again used to describe subjective experiences of violence and its aftermath, as well as to characterize the inter-ethnic (mis)understandings that each group tended to hold about the other.

Daniel's work illustrates the relative adaptability of semiotic anthropology to the changing theoretical and ideological orientations that were occurring during the end of the twentieth century in the discipline. However, despite attempts such as Daniel's to address issues and debates revolving around neo-imperialism and decolonization, semiotic anthropology was nonetheless due to wane as the new millennium approached. It remained identified with Singer's work and the pre-critical era of interpretive ethnography in which it had emerged. As new theoretical paradigms appeared designed to address globally focused issues of political-economy, a shift to analytical lens that were closely associated with Foucauldian critical theory gained prestige. Judith Butler's Derridian theory of gender performativity is, perhaps, one of the most influential examples of such an approach gaining popularity in socio-cultural anthropology at this time. As a consequence,

research under the rubric of semiotic anthropology declined as the twenty first century dawned. It would require yet another fundamental disciplinary shift for it to resurface.

Millennial signs of resurgence: (Bio)semiotic anthropology in the era of post-humanism

In recent years, there has been a renewed interest on the part of some socio-cultural anthropologists in semiotic anthropology. Although it is occurring in a markedly different guise, this resurgence, if it, in fact, eventually achieves that status, can be seen to echo in certain respects, the initial pattern of emergence. This reappearance has come about in part as a consequence of the increasing concern and attention paid across the disciplines to climate change and its dire consequences. Socio-cultural anthropology, in this regard, is participating in a movement currently sweeping the humanities, which is seeking to develop new ecological orientations toward cultural inquiry, adopting a critical stance toward human-centred or “anthropocentric” interpretive approaches in favour of approaches that challenge what is sometimes termed human exceptionalism – the idea that human intelligence is superior to that of all other lifeforms. The vast majority of anthropological research on human communication, learning, and symbolism since its inception would fall into this human exceptionalist category, given its tacit acceptance of the superiority of such human language to all other communicative systems.

In this broader context of the “non-human turn” (Grusin 2015), the cybernetic theory of Gregory Bateson (1972) has enjoyed a resurgence of interest in socio-cultural anthropology, being one of the very few theoretical approaches developed by a twentieth century socio-cultural anthropologist that kept the theoretical door open, as it were, for the study of non-human-centred forms of learning. The cyborg post-humanist theory of Donna Haraway and the rhizomatic orientation of sociologist Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory have been influential within the sub-discipline as well. Additionally, however, the emergence and rapid growth of the field of biosemiotics (Hoffmeyer 2008) also has provided ethnographic research with yet another means of preserving its capacity to study human meaning-making in cultural performances and practices, while at the same time responding to the criticisms of post-humanism. In this regard, semiotic anthropology, with a biosemiotic emphasis, has again offered socio-cultural anthropology a means of carrying forward its research agenda on human symbolism in the face of a fundamental shift away from theoretical paradigms that might otherwise have come to impede it.

A noteworthy example of recent interpretive ethnographic research on human cultural symbolism undertaken from an explicitly biosemiotic perspective is Eduardo Kohn's 2013 study, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*. Kohn's analysis of the ecological life and thought of the Runa cultural group of Ecuador's Upper Amazon has been given outstanding recognition for its theoretical innovation. *How Forests Think* was awarded the Bateson Prize in 2014 by the Society for Cultural Anthropology and heralded by reviewers as "marking a decisive moment" in the history of anthropology in which the discipline first began to move beyond anthropocentric views of humanity (Pandian 2014: 245). Kohn's interest in the study is to show that the human capacity to achieve this shift in perspective may rest upon the ability to imagine the perspectives of non-human beings, beings to which Kohn assigns the status of "selves." Kohn's ethnography documents traditional Runa understandings of this very kind, understandings evident not only in oral tradition but also in dreams and in actual incidents of human-non-human interaction with animals of the Amazonian forest such as monkeys, dogs, wild boar, and, most significantly, jaguars.

Kohn's theoretical perspective, features most prominently Peirce's semiotic, aligning closely with Peirce's pansemiotic view that, as Kohn expresses it "all life is semiotic" (2013: 78). Kohn employs Peirce's icon/index/symbol triad in particular to reveal various ways in which the forest and its life forms can be seen to exhibit the properties of such "living thought" (2013: 99). Images are iconic signs of particular importance in this regard. Positioning this semiotic analysis as a means of demonstrating the crucial importance of nonhuman perspectives for human life, Kohn's study can be read as a leading example in the new field of multispecies ethnography that seeks to bring the perspectives nonhuman living subjects into ethnographic research in more active capacities.

While Kohn identifies Peirce as his philosophical champion of sorts, his biosemiotic reading of Peirce follows most closely the work of biological anthropologist, Terrence Deacon. In this respect, Kohn's study also illustrates a divergence from Peirce's thought that is itself a hallmark feature, not only of Deacon's reading of Peirce, but also of the vast majority of anthropologists who have worked under the rubric of semiotic anthropology, including Singer, Daniel, Rappaport, and Geertz, among others, as well as the linguistic anthropological tradition as discussed above (e.g., Gal and Irvine). Its presence in Kohn's work, however, given its posthumanist comments, is particularly telling. This divergence occurs, as reviewers of Kohn's work have noted (Herrera and

Palsson 2014: 238), in regard to Peirce's definition of the symbol. Kohn, following Deacon (1997) and the standard anthropological reading, narrows the definition of the symbol to a "sign of convention", omitting Peirce's broader conceptualization of the symbol as a sign of habit, conventional or otherwise. Kohn then approximates the Peircean symbol to the Saussurian linguistic sign, a move that Singer himself did not make, but which the majority who have followed in this footsteps did, including Deacon. Rather than remaining consistent with Peirce in this symbolic theoretical regard – or with biosemioticians other than Deacon, for that matter, who have recognized Peirce's symbol classification as broader than Saussure's linguistic sign – Kohn followed the standard ethnographic position, arguing that the thinking of nonhuman lifeforms is entirely iconic and indexical in character. Kohn considers humans to be exceptional with regard to their capacity for symbol usage.

Kohn's position, which, again, echoes closely one that Deacon has repeatedly taken and defended (2012), is indicative of how deeply rooted the semiological linguicentric perspective is and remains in socio-cultural anthropological thought. While it has been challenged by biosemioticians outside of anthropology (Stjernfelt 2012, 2014; Patee 2007), the perspective remains the predominant view within the discipline.⁶

Conclusion

In closing, it remains to acknowledge the resilience of semiotic theory, broadly defined, within the sub-discipline of socio-cultural anthropology. It would be difficult to identify another set of theoretical perspectives on any topic of anthropological inquiry that have managed to survive the discipline's various reversals of theoretical fortunes with equal tenacity. However, it must also be recognized that semiotic anthropology, narrowly defined, has remained, and most likely will remain on the margins of ethnographic research, in the role of David facing the Goliath of semiology and its (post)structuralist allies. These latter continue to remain at its core, even if somewhat submerged at various moments. This may in large part be due to the strength of anthropocentrism on which the anthropological sub-disciplines have been founded, and which ultimately may prove impossible to transcend. Or, it may be due to a sympathy with and for dyadic

⁶ Perspectives adopting Peirce's broader definition of the symbol have been taken within the discipline by Ness (2016, 2020) and Pandian (2014) among others.

models of communication, which are models of relative clarity in many respects, compared to the slippery (or “glassy” in Singer’s perspective) processual intricacies of triadic semiotics. Whatever the reason, it seems unlikely that any single theoretical approach will ever prevail once and for all over the others. The diversity of human cultural and communicative practice and the breadth of the anthropological project itself make this outcome very hard to imagine, let alone bring about.

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