CONNECTIONS WITH AND WITHIN A TEXT: FROM FORSTER’S HOWARDS END TO THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF COMPARISON

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This is a paper concerned with the writing of anthropology, and the comparability of the relationship between the anthropologist and the monograph, and the novelist and the novel. In particular it juxtaposes E.M. Forster’s novel of England, Howards End, against my own anthropological depiction of Newfoundland.

As opening texts, however, let me quote from Sally Moore and Michael Jackson:

The issue of the day is how to address the fieldwork enterprise in a post-structuralist period, (...) how to look at part-structures being built and torn down.¹

It seems sounder and more honest to admit that our understanding is constituted dialectically out of the tensions and play between our intellectual tradition (Weltanschauung) and the adventitious circumstances of our particular lives. Doing so makes it more likely that we will hazard comparisons, not only between social structures and cultural forms but also between our experiences of life. Ethnography then becomes a form of Verstehen (...).²

These seem to me comparable statements. I see comparability in their focusing on the ‘fieldwork enterprise’/‘ethnography’, in their readiness to eschew an earlier fetishization of social ‘structures’/‘cultural forms’, and in their emphasis on active engagement between anthropologist and informant, between the individual and the environment he or she ‘addresses’, ‘builds and tears down’/‘experiences in adventitious circumstances’, ‘versteht’. That is, the meaning I derive from reading one text and the meaning I get from the other seem comparable to me when I set about constructing some broader argument of my own – say, writing a statement on what I think it is to do anthropology today and how this differs from the pursuits of others. I connect the texts like this when I put them into action in a text of my own.

But more than this, I do not merely take these sentences as opening texts, I make them texts. For, we may define a text after

¹ S.F Moore, ‘Explaining the present: theoretical dilemmas in processual ethnography’, American Ethnologist, 14 (1987), 730.
² M. Jackson, Paths towards a clearing (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 34.
James Boon, as systematically arranged communicative units which amount to a finite body of information (a speech, a piece of music, a sentence, a painting, a map, an act) when apprehended by an observer who uses a particular way of seeing. To use Moore's and Jackson's words as texts, and connect them as part of an argument, I must first recognize them as such. And this I do by employing a particular way of seeing, a paradigm of expectations, orderings and purposes. When I compare these sentences, in short, I engage in a whole range of what have been called 'cultural' practices (observing, apprehending, collating, describing) which I have learnt routinely to accomplish in conventional ways and in specific contexts.

So, what is the specific context of my quoting from Moore and Jackson for use as part of an argument about anthropology today? Obviously it is an academic context; also it is an ironical one, where the very notion of 'cultural' practice is being called into question. This questioning is on two counts. First, it is claimed that such a use of 'cultural' is a thin guise for 'political' acts, a disguising of relations of power. To construct texts, for example, is to have the power, the privilege, the training to write; and to write up others is to do so in possible disregard of their very different conventions of connection, of description, of information and its exchange. Secondly, the notion of 'cultural' practice is today questioned in terms of the ideas of consensus and boundary which have been its concomitants. For in a world where culture is regarded as increasingly 'creolized' and 'compressed', these are no longer felt to be persuasive images. Here, individuals engage in social life not by courtesy of singular overriding systems of norms but by selecting a way amongst a multitude of often competing systems juxtaposed against one another. In sum, the questioning of 'culture' raises issues of how one is to write an anthropological text which connects an observer with the social life of another, indeed whether 'one' can or should write such a text at all.

These are incisive not to say debilitating questions. They pierce to the core of anthropology's view of its own enterprise. For, as Bob Barnes describes it, the anthropological problematic has always turned on the relationship between description and generalization: on the

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4 This is 'a terrorist alienation' according to Stephen Tyler. See 'Post-modern ethnography: from document of the occult to occult document', *Writing culture*, eds. G. Marcus & J. Clifford (Berkeley: California University Press, 1986), 128.
6 Tyler describes 'fragmentary social worlds, without synthesizing allegories and with an inexhaustible supply of them', [as note 4] 132.
7 David Parkin dubs the context Dadaistic: a mocking of the possibilities of describing in terms of fixed structures, singular voices and orthodox certainties, both within the anthropologist's field of ethnographic research and within the discipline per se. See 'Comparison as a search for continuity', in *Comparative anthropology*, ed. L. Holy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 66.
niceties of comparison. The anthropological enterprise has been a comparative enterprise and it is the hows, whys and wherefores of comparison that the present context of debate calls into question.

When I make sentences from Moore and Jackson into comparable opening texts, then, it is with these kinds of questions as contextual backdrop. And I connect them here with the intention of writing a riposte. In particular, I want to present an image of comparative anthropology which, while sympathizing with a 'post-structuralist' attack on traditional notions of socio-cultural singularities and integration - 'societies' with 'social structures' and 'collective grammars' - still suggests that comparisons are possible and, indeed, necessary bases of anthropological writing. As Marilyn Strathern sets out the agenda: what is called for is new imaging for comparative anthropology whereby we compare - specify connections, and alternatives between these - and at the same time depict how contingent these comparisons are; show how cultural constructions continually 'inform' (parody, oppose, copy, subvert) one another, without introducing structures of comparison which connect class-members in a singular, hierarchical or generalizing way, necessarily eschewing their differences through an organic integration or reducing their idiosyncrasies by common denomination.

To this end I argue that a persuasive image of comparison might be one which takes us back to (re-begins from) what we know of our own comparing work as individuals in routine social interaction - even (especially) in a 'post-structuralist' world we can retain symbolic-interactionist insights. That is, comparison is something for which all social interaction continually calls: comparison is one of the very basic practices in which we engage in the initiation and maintenance of day-to-day social relations. We construct meaningful social environments for ourselves by identifying distinct entities (people, events, opinions etc.) and relations between them, and by making judgements on their likenesses and differences, their commensurability as parts of a class, when juxtaposed. My conviction is that appreciating the art of such commonsensical, microsocial and mundane acts of comparison is a prerequisite for any more technical refinement of the concept of comparison, as well as for extending the logic of comparison onto any more macrosocial a stage. This entails a comparative anthropology which recognizes that comparisons are cognitive constructs which live in, and derive from, moments of interaction as individually interpreted: part of an individual's construction of meaning, contextualized

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8 R.H. Barnes, 'Anthropological comparison', [as note 7], 119.
by other cognitive constructs and put to use in other such interactive moments. Hence, comparisons are situated, ongoing, multiple, often poetic or metaphoric; they are not necessarily ‘rational’, hierarchically ordered or consensual, nor later superseded by ones which are – whether in the connective schema of the anthropologist or of her informants.

But if we eschew the old images of comparison – nesting patterns and trees, for example, entailing integration or denomination – what can we put in their stead? How best might we represent the constructing and depicting of these partial connections, as Strathern phrases it? In this search, I receive inspiration from E.M. Forster’s *Howards End*.11

*Howards End* was the novel Forster published before *A passage to India*, and wrote between 1908 and 1910.12 While its famous epigram, ‘Only connect...’ has figured in anthropological discourse for a number of years, here I also find an appositely current model of comparison without integration and comparison without stasis: comparisons appear as processual, and relations of one moment do not prescribe or proscribe those of the next. Moreover, here I find a model which clearly allows for an agent – he who is responsible for arriving at a juxtaposition between comparable entities. For Forster foresaw comparability in terms of an intermediary (a participant-observer) making repeated excursions between what he apprehends as separate entities or domains, and drawing connections by coming to terms with what he interprets, through this interaction, to be regularities of life practised by each; this results in a singular view because it represents the experience of one protagonist, but not necessarily the viewing of a singularity.

It is an elucidation and application of this image that this paper attempts. My course is first to examine Forster’s process of comparison in *Howards End*, then to conduct a similar exercise with ethnographical material of my own from Newfoundland. In both, it is the consciousness of interaction of the participant-observer which remains centre-stage: as narrative voice, as interpretative medium, as avenue to comparative appreciation.

11 Marilyn Strathern herself, of course, has favoured the image of the cyborg – that creature of science fiction (the Six Million Dollar Man; the Cybermen; Robocop) which is part-human, part-machine; part-animal body, part-manufactured engine; part-animate, part-technological. Here, she explains, is represented a single entity whose miscellaneous parts nevertheless retain their particularity and do not get appropriated into a higher unity; a whole picture, perhaps but not a picture of a whole. Thus the cyborg overcomes the false mathematic of seeing entities only as a series of ones (atomism) or as parts of a whole (holism). See ‘Partial connections’ [as note 9] 31–4. However, what is missing from this imaging is that no allowance is made for cyborgs’ makers and menders, even though it is admitted that these creatures cannot recreate themselves. Whereas, I feel an image which is to assist our conceptualization of relations between entities which are partially connected, must also tell us how those relations are to be achieved and maintained; hence my offering of an alternative.

Howards End deals with the divisions in English middle-class society in the turbulent years of suburbanizing change that preceded the First World War. Whereas once ties to the earth had helped lend permanence, depth and emotion to relationships, now the nomadism of a cosmopolitan civilization, its 'stink, dust and chatter', is seen to threaten personal relations as never before. Hence, Howards End is replete with praise for the English countryside and its characters are defined and judged by their relationships with it. For the question that Forster sets himself to answer is 'who should inherit England? to whom does the soul of the country best belong?'. Or, as we might prefer to phrase it, 'how should the nature of English society be characterized, and how properly depicted?'.

In response, across this broad canvas, Forster plots the inter-course of two very different types of English character, two kinds of sensibility, from which modern English society is seen to derive. They might be called the artistic, or spiritual, as opposed to the commercial, or commonsensical. At first, each is depicted in isolation: each regards itself as whole. The artistic type Forster represents by the Schlegel family: sisters Margaret and Helen and brother Theobald, children of a mixed marriage between a (now deceased) German father and English mother. They live in London, on independent means, hosting soirées and going to concerts, discussion groups and university. Life's essence, they concur, is not a battle but a romance with beauty (101). Moreover, the beauty of the world and its wonder is not to do with modern amenities and wealth but with the great unseen - with the spirit which walks at night on dark hills (117-18). It is there that the Schlegels are drawn, and an understanding of this secret life that they seek - even if daily life gives no external evidence of it. For there, they are confident, is to be procured an absoluteness which rises above the physicality of the farmyard, undermining the emptiness of money's empire, of 'this-worldly' injustice and greed. They believe that personal relations should be the measure for all formal ones and that public life ought to mirror a good inner one; it is 'personal everything' which becomes for them 'the most important thing for ever and ever' (163). To this end, they publicly espouse political change, tolerance, temperance and sexual equality. They fear for the soul of the present societal apparatus, for it is manned by officials with no 'I' in the middle of their heads, whose empty vision traps them in a formal, sterile world of 'telegrams and anger' (218).

The commercial type is represented by the Wilcox family: father Henry, sons Charles and Paul and daughter Evie, whose forebears have lived in England for generations and bequeathed them country property like the house in rural Hampshire, 'Howards End'. The Wilcoxes boast 'business brains', and ties to a great outer life of preparedness, materialism, immediacy, planning and organization. They do everything step by step and in black and white, so that love is transmuted into marriage settlements, death into death duties and people into nerves
and bone (27). Nevertheless, it is the like of the Wilcoxes who have bestowed to the nation its peculiar glory: the gift of comradeship. They may not be looked to for the passion of a warrior, a lover, a god, but they do provide the strength and adventure of steadfast companions (250). Their virtues and priorities—character heroism and duty; neatness and decision; a ranking of money above intelligence, and intelligence above imagination (308)—may be of the second rank, but they still represent a real force, a guard against glibness and sloppiness. Moreover, thrilled by bigness, the business type also becomes an imperial animal, breeding fast and sound, and carrying overseas. Here is the basis of English civilization without which England would merely have engendered generations of savagery (164).

Having painted these two types of English character, Forster then shows us that they are, in fact, neither entities in isolation nor wholes. His depiction of English society calls for them to be seen to be meaningfully connected, and for us to realize that, if separate, the world of each would be grey and dead. Without connections to the Wilcoxes, the Schlegels would have no relations with the forces shaping the world, and their culture would be instrumentally impotent and economically dependent. They would create ideas without context, without responsibility, without weight. Whilst the Wilcoxes, without being connected to the Schlegels, would waste their strength on haste, overpreparedness and suspicion, beguiled by a vulgar phantom which would say that ‘ten square miles was ten times better than one, whilst a thousand square miles was heaven’ (188). Hence, Forster is keen for his characters to overcome the horrors of atomism and reach towards some ‘ultimate harmony’: his depiction of English society calls for beauty and adventure to combine (307).

This Forster achieves by our seeing Margaret Schlegel and Henry Wilcox marry and set up house together in the midst of the English countryside at ‘Howards End’. But, importantly, the marriage is not described as an easy meeting of the two sides, nor as their consolidation into a larger whole. Rather, the marriage calls for the constant mediation between the Wilcox clan and the Schlegels by Margaret; she acts as an intermediary through whom two discrete sides meet. In effecting this, Margaret is seen to achieve, to experience, to come to know, ‘proportion’. From being a rootless cosmopolitan, she learns to love the soil of England and finds connection both with the inconceivable and with the joys of the flesh (191). She maintains a love of poetry but also learns a sympathy for technical complexities (281). She discovers that independent thoughts are usually the result of independent incomes and that money is the warp of civilization (120). Margaret is able to rise above the bitterness of both families, come to terms with the prejudices of each and build a home at ‘Howards End’, where the steady Wilcox knowledge of immediate reality and the holistic Schlegel knowledge of eternal truth are grouped together: connected but not amalgamated (250).
Forster thus answers his question about England’s rightful owner, about the society’s genuine character, neither wholly in favour of those who moulded her power (Wilcoxes), nor those who perceive her inner life (Schlegels), but in terms of a continual zigzagging journey between the two. He has his protagonist, Margaret, realize that her love for her husband (security) and for the truth (her sister and brother) are separated by an eternal gulf, but also realize that if they became one, then ‘life itself (…) might vanish into air’ (215): English society, as such, would cease to exist. So, Margaret zigzags between them; she builds within herself a ‘rainbow bridge’ by which she is able cognitively to link her disparate experiences, to connect the businessman to the mystic, the beast to the monk, the prose to the passion and, thus ‘live in fragments no longer’. She reconciles the contrastive by keeping proportion; and not the ‘sterile’ proportion of a common denominator, of the middle road, but the ‘heroic’ proportion of treating contradictions equally, of making continuous excursions into the domains of each.

Through Margaret, of course, we can also see Forster. It might be Margaret who demonstrates the way to our seeing the true character of English society, she who makes connections, draws comparisons, and then proceeds to encompass these disparate domains within the integrity of her own mind, but it is Forster’s England we find. As Bradbury has noted, there are times when Forster’s narrative voice (‘one had the sense of. . .’) and his speaking as Margaret are tonally indistinguishable, so that their phrases pass into each other. In other words, it is not just Margaret’s home at ‘Howards End’ which takes the form of unconsolidated connections between people, but also Forster’s view of England. He seeks a comprehensive account of English experience, and his solution is a subtle and constant juxtaposition of a multiplicity of characteristics which shows that their integration is impossible while their interconnections are manifold. That is, he manages to prescribe an interconnectedness between people without a forfeiting of their idiosyncrasy and multivocality, by describing the realization of these connections as a social truth which is ‘alive’. The seeing of connections does not derive wholly from the view from one side or another; nor does it come from the abysses in between. Rather, it derives from a coming to terms with the world-views and social situations of each, and making continuous mental journeys (‘rainbow bridges’) between them by aggregating the diverse experiences of participant-observation within the encompassment of a single mind (‘achieving proportion’).

Moreover, Forster demonstrates zigzagging links across rainbow bridges on a number of different levels in *Howards End*. There are the links which Margaret effects between the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes

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as we see, and also those between the intelligentsia (the men of vision) and the business world (the men of action) which these characters symbolize. But, taking a step back, we can also see Forster making connections between different parts of himself as an artist. First, there is the obvious connection between the views of the book’s narrator and those of Forster himself. Then, as mentioned, there are the tonal connections between the narrator and Margaret. Then again, this sympathetic Forster also connects with a quizzical, ironic one who is sceptical about his own (and Margaret’s and the narrator’s) liberal, humanist values and can appreciate the heroism of an imperial order. And lastly, *Howards End* constitutes a connection between two types of discursive voice which Forster adopts: the social visionary (whose characters’ interaction symbolizes a message about a better future) and the social commentator (writing a comedy of manners in a highly circumscribed historico-cultural context). In other words, Forster’s model of relationship is flexible enough also to tie the writer in with his characters, and in a number of different ways. He may stand outside his field of description but he is still connected to it; his voice diversifies and becomes one of many. As Forster remarked in his own extended study of literary theory, the writer becomes mixed up in his material, indeed getting rolled over and over by it.14

Finally, Forster’s zigzagging image is processual: of connections without end. In *Aspects of the novel* he also describes how a writer should induce a sense of expansion, of his vision opening out rather than rounding off as it comes to completion; hence, as *Howards End* proceeds, so our picture of English society and of Forster’s relationship with his creation becomes ever more complex.15 We see connections between more and more, on more levels.

Edmund Leach dubbed social anthropologists ‘bad novelists’; they attempt to gain ‘insight’ into social behaviour (that quality of deep understanding which belongs to the great artist) and yet all the time they ape the experiments, measurements and predictions of ‘objective truth’ of the natural scientist; hence, they do not realize their potential.16 What I have been doing is examining the structure of *Howards End* in order to see how a novelist’s insight might include a way of imaging comparison: from which I draw *A Journey of Comparison Between Different Interactions (with Individuals/Groups/Characteristics/etc.*), facing.

That is, I find an understanding of comparison which lays stress upon a connecting agent, whose acts of comparing take place while she is immersed in the field of study and result from making continuous trips between different talking-relationships. Moreover, these acts of

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15 Ibid., 149.
A Journey of Comparison Between Different Interactions
(with Individuals/Groups/Characteristics/etc.).

Key

Agent's Journey
Agent in Interaction
Agent's Cognitive
Construction of
Interaction

Agent

Entity 1 — Agent

Entity 2 — Agent

Entity 3 — Agent

Entity 4 — Agent
comparing are relative to the itinerary of the agent; present comparisons are informed by all the baggage of past experiences, and will be further informed by those to come. Moreover, the field-itinerary is never wholly prescribed or predetermined. The next journey is always to some extent a matter of particular contingencies, and another participant-observer may find otherwise – his route the result of engaging in different routine interactions with different significant others in a different sequence. Thus, we might expect fieldworkers in the 'same' social environment to make a variety of connections between a variety of entities, without there having to accrue a necessary integrating, subsuming, or otherwise privileging of one particular structure of identities and relations rather than another.

Now I turn to some of my own data to see how Forster’s image might be acted upon. These derive from a study of conversation which I undertook in the Canadian city of St John’s, and the comparisons I shall make concern verbal utterance. In particular, I compare the ways in which academics define the problem of violence in Newfoundland society. Newfoundland was England’s oldest colony (1497) and has been Canada’s newest and poorest province since 1949. St John’s is its capital. Traditionally, its people, 98% of whom are of West Country English and Irish extraction, eked out a harsh existence in isolated fishing villages (outports), while permanently in debt to a small class of (mostly) city merchants. Its population today is 500,000, with 140,000 in the greater urban area around St John’s. With a university, conference centres, cathedrals, international refugees, oil executives, politicians, the city still represents a cosmopolitan centre amidst a large parochial hinterland.

I conducted my research by frequenting a number of St John’s locations (bars, hospitals, courts-of-law, university, halfway-houses and homes), negotiating in each identities and interactional exchanges which became routine. Memorizing the words and actions of these exchanges, I would record them in writing as fully and as soon after the event as I could. As in my earlier study of a Cumbrian village, I soon found the practice second nature. Here, then, I present my data – the behaviours of a collection of academics relaxing at a party – in the form of a reconstructed scene which I extract from my field journal.

The St John’s academic community is small and close-knit; from professor to fresher, there is a casual mixing of rank. Everyone sees everyone, if not around the university then in the arts theatre or the secondhand bookstore or the Hive bar or, as here, at a private party. Everyone knows everyone, by name or face, or reputation or defamation, or at least knows of them.

After a Saturday night at the Hive bar, I join a group moving on to

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Philippa Howells’ apartment for a party. She is a post-graduate history student from Vancouver. The party is in full swing, a motley meeting of manners and styles. There are denim jackets, crew-cuts, Donald Duck brooches, gypsy ear-rings, cowboy boots, red sneakers, serious tortoise-shell spectacles and explorers’ beards.

First, I make my way towards the music. Philippa’s bedroom has been turned into a discotheque and a Rolling Stones record blares from the stereo, the stylus jumping as the dancers bounce around the wooden floor. It is too dark to see anyone I know, so I go back to the living-room. More people have just arrived from the Hive, among them a tall man, shrouded in old clothes, lurching around the room pretending to be a stooped old man. It is Professor Dewit of the Folklore Department doing his Newfoundland Mummer impersonation.

‘I have my invitation, boys! I have my invitation’, he says and points to the paper mask taped over his face. There is laughter from the guests sitting cross-legged on the floor, smoking dope. They seem to appreciate this avowal of loyalty to Christmas custom, even if it is mid-March and Professor Dewit is an American.

Maintaining his aplomb, Professor Dewit then stumbles in the direction of Philippa Howells, and squeezes her in senile and shortsighted embarrassment. Of course! This is the mummer’s license for lewdness and reversing manners; the Prof. knows his stuff.

‘I have my bags, see? I have my bags with me’. Next, Professor Dewit reveals that inside the plastic bag dangling from his wrist are half-a-dozen more, carefully crumpled, which need disseminating, confetti-style, before a bottle of plonk can be disinterred and presented to Philippa.

At last, running out of props and all but polite laughs, Dewit unmasks and reveals himself to the expectant crowd. Ah! That bulge in his midriff was a bath towel after all . . . and that bulge in his behind was not, mimes the Professor, now Chaplinesque.

There are hurrahs for Dewit and Philippa takes the wine next door into her cramped kitchen. I follow her and there find most of the party guests, chatting and watching their cache of beer in the loaded fridge and the chilli bubbling away on the stove. I get a drink and lean by the door just as Dewit is led into the kitchen by Stella Spears, one of his students, to find some refreshment. The tatters of his mumming costume seemingly justify her attempts at sounding like an old Newfoundland maid and her high-pitched sing-song resounds around the room: ‘This way my old dear. And you not looking a day over eighty! Why you must be ninety if you’re a day’. She witters on until Dewit finds some red wine, then he and the whine recede into the dope-room.

‘Now that still captures Newfoundland for me: wild animals and tame peasants!’ I hear Lance Haines say. ‘I mean I really feel this is the gem of Canada. It’s quiet and peaceful, no crime, just y’ mummers and y’ good times’.
Lance, I know, is an anthropology student from Toronto, here doing an M.A. He is sitting on the edge of the kitchen table with two friends, Sam Dyke and Chuck Lewis. They are also from the mainland studying for Masters degrees, but in sociology not anthropology.

'It's 'cause of all the conflict-avoidance customs, I guess', Lance continues, 'and non-violent culture, and rituals of catharsis like mumming. So your only murders round here are common-or-garden, eh'.

Sam laughs. 'But you know it's never like that today, Lance, really. The war seriously changed the place... I guess crime in Newfoundland's risen 600% since the war. Right Chuck? Crimes of violence especially'.

'But there's still a way of life of camaraderie, and reciprocity and deference, so its only in situations of terrible emotional stress, like in a family, that you get norms like against violence overridden by people's emotions'.

'Maybe before the war, Lance, yeah. Then it was just murders over jealous lovers and bungled burglaries, eh. But now you get far more meaty stuff like nutters and psychos killing strangers. And exotic crimes like rape, and sex-killers'.

'That's right, Lance', Chuck agrees. 'There's been like a new dynamic here since the war. More juveniles in crime, and women, and drunk-and-disorderly, and obscenity and public mischief and B-and-E and arson, as well as high-profile stuff liked armed robbery and homicide'.

'Is that right? But I still thought these crime waves kind of petered up and then petered down again'.

'But not since the war, see Lance', Chuck insists. 'Whatever y' commonsense perception says'.

'And it's not all violence in the home any more, behind closed doors, either. Like there's professional thieves about too, and you can track 'em through the 'stats'. So armed robberies go down for a year or two when Igor and Screw-Loose and Boris get sent to the pen, but not for long'.

Lance laughs. 'Is that right! A regular career structure! That's fascinating, 'cause I just been reading Matthews and Firestone and them lot about cultural norms in the outports forbidding the expression of inter-personal violence except if there's alcohol about to kind of rationalize it, but this sounds like in St John's there's a different worldview, or else the society is disintegrating, or something'.

'Well, it's the spread of urbanization and oil, eh', Sam explains. 'And do you think as the city expands people's thresholds of acceptance kind of contract?' Lance suggests. 'So then we perceive an upturn in violence and we just won't accept it?'

'Yeah, but it's not just perception', Sam insists. 'I mean the real picture from the 'stats' is of a jump in the level of violence. Like a critical point's been passed'.
That's right', Chuck agrees. 'See, Lance this isn't just a small
town any more. There's been a sort of take-off of violence, a quantum
leap. Like for a small town you'd get an arithmetic progression in the
"stats", eh. So a town of 50,000 won't get twice the violent crime of
some place of 25,000 'cause it's still a small town. But then suddenly
it's a city, and you're getting into Urban Sociology'.

'Oh yeah? So what would a causal explanation look like to you
lot? Any general patterns?' Lance wonders.

Sam has a go: 'Well. Don't forget violence is a universal question
of industrial society, eh. And to write a theoretical explanation, you'd
have to tie it to class differences in capitalist society to find your social
and economic causatives'.

'Right', Chuck agrees. 'It's your socio-economic infrastructure
that shapes society, class war and the rest, and then you get misper-
ceptions of class membership and violence between members of the
working class 'cause of ideology and false consciousness, see?'

'Yeah, okay', Lance halts the rush. 'But how about a cultural
explanation? Have you got a feel for that? I mean on the empirical or
ethnographic level. Like a punch in the face, or a dead body'.

'You mean something y' typical Newf. could understand, eh?'

Sam laughs.

'Okay, Lance. But you can't get a real picture without relating all
this violence to class hegemony, and inequalities in Newfoundland
society. Like take stranger-violence. I mean that's what people are
shit-scared of, right. Getting murdered walking the streets. But to
explain why that's bursting out and why it gets folk so outraged, you
gotta bring in Durkheim, and say that's real violence, against all of
society; while domestic violence like wife-battery isn't the same 'cause
it's more definable. See?'

At this point, Philippa squeezes over from stirring the chilli.

'Chuck, be a love and pop out for some paper plates for me, would
you? For the chilli, later'. She licks her fingertips. 'I thought I
had enough but I miscalculated'. She and Chuck seem quite inti­
mate, and Chuck is soon pushing past me and heading for the
24-hour corner store with Lance and Sam in tow, talking about
buying more beer.

Philippa turns to the stove once more but then notices a rather
tired and morose-looking Doyle Robbins, her history professor, seated
by himself (and a beer bottle) at the far end of the kitchen table, and
sways over to him. 'I'm pleased you made it, Doyle!'

'Don't be so sure, Phil. You know how your mastermind-
sociologist lover-boy gets up my nose!'

'What? Chuck? Oh come on, he's harmless enough. What's he
been saying?'

'Oh, just the usual garbage sociology has to serve up: "Newfound-
land isn't like it once was. It's gotten far more violent now. Moan.
Moan". You know the stuff'.
Philippa laughs. ‘But hasn’t it, Doyle? All this oil in town, soon. And the police always calling for firearms?’

‘Oh come on Phil! There’s always been violence here. It’s just that traditionally people weren’t that interested, so it never reached the papers. And anyway, people didn’t read. But look at our media now! They’re getting as bad as in the States. So people want to know how to distance themselves and stop it happening to them. That’s why folks wanna read all about it’.

‘But isn’t that part of what the sociologists are saying?’

‘Nah. They want to get us all mouthing pop-theory; so they keep preaching the moral breakdown of conventional modes of social control. And they’ve even gotten the police pushing their angle: “Anomie’s coming to town”, I heard from one copper’s lips!’ Doyle grins and shakes his head.

Philippa laughs. ‘Well it sure sounds well!’

‘Precisely. Which means more jobs in the profession for the boys in future, and more juicy research grants. It’s the same as unemployment: think of all the jobs they’d lose if there was no unemployment!’

‘But seriously, Doyle, haven’t crimes of violence increased since the 1950s, say?’

‘Well, only a tiny amount, I’d guess. Just in line with the growing city. . . But it’s all cyclical, and that’s just what these anthropologists should be studying. But so little of value gets done. So there’s just this widespread notion of peaceful, traditional Newfoundland, free of crime, till suddenly: “Gosh! Beware the crime wave.” That’s buncombe’.

‘Sounds like you don’t put a lot of store by those old anthropological monographs, Doyle!’

‘Oh come on, Phil! They’re laughable. Like I told you, those anthropologists ’d come round and my people ’d tell them all manner of balderdash and white lies, and it would be studiously written down and then published! . . . No, it’s all claptrap. Because there’s never any historical perspective. . . And suddenly they’ve all hit upon “Violence” as the new in-word. It’s what Foucault says about concepts suddenly becoming reflexive items of discussion, you know, like “Man”. Well, now it’s “Violence”. Books on books on books on it, from the States or Canada, so it’s like the new in-thing in opposition to which these professional sociologists and anthropologists can state Newfoundland culture. . . No, at the risk of repeating myself, Phil, you really need to take a historical perspective on life here. And then you can see how things now are very much the same as they were in the nineteenth century. Even the eighteenth century. Maybe not the seventeenth century, ’cause things do change, of course. But it’s gradual. Like I reckon the nineteenth century was full of Irish radicalism here, influenced by the French Revolution. You can see a covert battle going on right through Newfoundland history. And
occasionally things just erupt, and like you get the 1830s period of plebeian collective violence. . . And even mumming gets far more interesting when you see it as a sort of reversal of the relations of production imposed by the merchants. You know, the workers playing out a reversed economy and, in fact, getting quite subversive. Anyway, it’s an interesting thought’.

‘Sure is! Hey, that sounds really neat, Doyle. That’d be a great theory’.

‘And see, maybe that’s why they banned mumming in 1869 in Harbour Grace, ’cause of some shenanigans they felt threatened by the previous year. . . And by the looks of your Professor Dewit, by 1985 they’ve finally succeeded in their oppressive bourgeoisification. But really, Phil, people just don’t know what they’re talking about when they say Newfoundland is more violent now than before. Even Newfoundlanders my age; it’s amazing. And I dunno where they were in the thirties and forties. Like looting and rioting in St John’s in 1932. Pitched battles, with police using tear gas and working as undercover agents. And this was a quite selfconscious use of violence, mind, as a bargaining chip by the poor and hungry, negotiating to improve their conditions’.

‘Is that right? I never realized the thirties here were so political’.

‘No-one does, Phil. It’s a neglected decade. Whereas, before World War Two solved everyone’s problems, St John’s was just a smelly, dirty slum. In fact, they were calling all of Newfoundland “the slum of the Empire”. . . It’s all the same: historical cycles – depression, violence, war, prosperity, affluence, recession, violence. I’m afraid, Phil, plus ça change, plus la même chose. . . Nothing new’. Doyle resigns into the staring-into-one’s-beer-pose, and Philippa looks pained.

I decide I’ve had enough. Besides, the Folklore clique has just made a successful take-over bid on the music; jigs and reels are emanating from the ‘disco’ and everyone seems to be decamping from the kitchen for a spot of ye olde step-dancing, again. So I walk home.

Stepping away from the above text and regarding it more analytically, how might the actors and their characteristics be compared without being integrated into an overarching, holistic structure? In particular, how can I connect these conversational opinions without corrupting the integrity of each?

Initially, moving round the party I found rather separate activities underway: dancing, dope-smoking, guarding beer. There was Professor Dewit entertaining admirers through a reconstruction of country manners, verbal sparring from student drinking buddies Lance Haines, Chuck Lewis and Sam Dyke, and Professor Robbins drilling his tutee, Philippa Howells.

However, I can also say that all cultivated a certain eccentricity.
All were alike in resembling what Tim Ingold has called 'cultural
connoisseurs'; as artists and academics, at least part of the identities
which they construed for themselves entailed observing 'Newfound­
land society' from its interstices. All were involved, that is, in an
academic society which lived by a reification and abstraction of those
traditions, symbols and problems in which a wider society was
engrossed. The customs of the rest, defined and understood, pre­
served in amber, served them all as personal assets for negotiation of
relations within a St John's college fraternity.

Moreover, listening to the conversations of connoisseurs like
Lance, Sam, Chuck, Philippa and Doyle, I could recognize blatant
echoes. Even though there was no overt admission that a debate, in
series, was taking place, all, in different ways, focused on 'the problem
of violence in Newfoundland society'. Social problems, as Herbert
Blumer claimed, need not be conceived of as spontaneous expressions
of intrinsic states of disfunction; rather, social problems become
problems and become public through routine processes of definition,
negotiation and legitimation. What I saw at the party was part of a
process whereby proponents of a number of social sciences from the St
John's academy created social problems in order to vindicate and
support their disciplines; for at a time when public funding was
limited and to some extent correlated with public attention and
esteem, those in the academy felt they must be seen to be relevant to
the wider society. Thus, anthropology, sociology and history
competed for the most convincing construction of Newfoundland
reality and, specifically, the best accounting for the problem of
Newfoundland violence. I can say that Lance, Chuck, Sam, Philippa
and Doyle were comparable in their attempts to articulate with lay
Newfoundland society through the construction of social problems
concerning violence.

Furthermore, our speakers' constructions were alike in the
preponderance of what C. Wright Mills derided as dense social­
scientific jargon or 'socspeak'. Without the aura of longer­
established sciences, Mills explained, it is by exploiting a highly
technical vocabulary that social sciences (the 'unnatural sciences'
(Nietzsche)) hope to routinize distinct identities and emblemize their
products. Hence, speakers felt that if they hoped to disseminate an
account of the workings of the surrounding society which was
plausible, affording credit and respect to their discipline as a science,
then they had to wed the phrase 'an increase in Newfoundland
violence' to their fund of technical language. In short, speakers
seemed to agree about an arena of discussion and the terms in which

debate was to proceed. Moreover, they also seemed to 'agree' that only they were right; each actor believed that their discipline wielded especial currency in solving the problem of Newfoundland violence and especial vitality in disseminating a solution, and those beliefs were oppositionary and mutually exclusive. Chuck and Sam conceived of sociology's correctness in terms of anthropology's incorrectness, while a rather lonesome Lance inferred the converse, and then Philippa and Doyle discredited them all in favour of history. The result was that as socspeak interleaved with socspeak, the serial exchange of phrases on violence in Newfoundland did not so much lessen distance between actors as afford them means of maintaining boundaries around distinct ways of speaking.

Thus I find three distinct constructions. First, I find anthropologist Lance Haines identifying 'otherness', and describing Newfoundland as the gem of Canada: a peaceful society of tame peasants and good-timing mummers. For in the traditional outport ethnography, the monograph recounts norms of conflict-avoidance and deference. Any increase of violence in urban St John's, then, Lance merely traces to a lowering of perceptual thresholds on the one hand, and an increase in tensions which cause more emotional stress in family and friendship relations on the other; and these, he knows, still call for cultural explanations which may be achieved without the highfalutin theories of professional sociologists.

Next, I find comrade sociologists Chuck Lewis and Sam Dyke describing the sort of violence which St John's now witnesses as a new phenomenon and part of a 600% increase in crime since World War Two. From the traditional, rural scenario of the anthropologists, there has been a take-off into the domain of urban sociology. For this is meaty data: violence perpetrated by nutters and strangers; this is archetypal Durkheimian violence against society as a whole. So, people's commonsensical notions just have to be replaced by sociological facts and statistics. Then it will be seen how this increase in St John's violence relates to downtown ghettos, to industrialization and unemployment, to class relations of production and false consciousness.

Finally, I find historian Doyle Robbins further initiating Philippa Howells in the realization that explanation is worthless without a temporal perspective. Then it becomes clear that the Newfoundland of the twentieth century is equivalent to the Newfoundland of the eighteenth century, merely with a different style of reporting; so that elements of Newfoundland as the slum of the Empire, such as its violence, adhere all through. It is all very well for sociologists and anthropologists to jump on the sensationalist bandwagon, as Foucault foresaw, and, for the sake of research grants and jobs, start popularizing a more violent present and anomic future, but in fact the anthropologist is a joke reporter, while the sociologists, with their mod-con statistics, forget that Newfoundland society predates Confed-
eration. Surely, it is only short memories or else poor scholarship which can obscure truths such as these.

Analysing the links between speakers in this scene, then, leaves me with a compartmentalized picture of the St John’s college of cultural connoisseurs. Squashed together in the same room, a diversity of linguistic emblems was brought forward on parade. Furthermore, through these different terminologies a series of different social problems was constructed, each possessing its own logic and disciplinary rigour and each ready for study. Thus, those who agreed on the same terminological domain did not only reaffirm their differences to others but also extend these to include ‘an increase in Newfoundland violence’; by adding these words to the fund of formulae they already owned, members of a discipline shared yet more fully with their fellows.

But then, taking a further step back, it is not just an analysis of this text that I would present, rather the entire remembrance and reconstruction of one Saturday evening in St John’s. Highlighting Philippa’s party as a distinct social occasion, I bring Professor Dewit and Stella and Lance and Sam and Chuck and Philippa and Professor Robbins into distinctive interaction, excluding other people, words and events as background noise. Moreover, I have my individual speakers represent academic disciplines which meet in a St John’s academy, and have them compete to monopolize an arena of public relevance, Connections do not become overarching, however, and the protagonists come together and influence each other tangentially and unawares – or, at least, without overtly admitting the interaction to each other: Philippa’s party prompting Dewit’s display, which prompts Stella’s impersonation, which prompts Lance’s description which prompts Chuck’s correction, which prompts Sam’s agreement, which prompts Robbins’s disgust, which prompts Philippa’s sympathy. In short, I present a scene in whose margins I (as narrator, as participant-observer) appear, through which different individuals and academic disciplines are compared in terms of their understandings of violence in Newfoundland society, through which they (and me, as fellow-collegian) can all be seen to be partially connected; I offer an account in which I bring individual characters into serial relationships without impugning the wholeness which I would impart to each.

Nonetheless, while people, words and events thus appear through the apparatus of my representation, I do not believe this is to be apologized for or overcome, just made explicit. There is nothing beyond version but version, and what the anthropologist can hope to do in his writing-up is to juxtapose all those versions met in the field, including his own, together with the particular interactional route which led to his identifying them and interpreting their meaning.

David Parkin describes the comparisons which anthropology draws as more often closer to the illuminations of poetry and art than natural
Certainly, it is significant the frequency with which a poetic image is favoured as a model – from Haraway’s cyborg to Wittgenstein’s family of faces. Parkin himself favours Cezanne’s paintings, ‘Still Life with Apples and Oranges’: six variations which complement each other but which would be misconstrued if treated as a complete set. Here, Parkin suggests, is inspiration for a comparative anthropology which recognizes that our socio-cultural reality (like Cezanne’s visual one) is a potentially endless series of perspectives which lack a common underlying structure or essence but whose interconnections, when seen metaphorically, are multiple and ephemeral.

It is with this that I have been concerned in this paper: an imaging of comparative anthropology as a metaphoric exercise, where connections made (between structures, between characteristics, between individual perspectives) are themselves matters of perspective; and where metaphors originate in and are validated not by ‘objective’ features of a social environment, but rather by those moments of interaction in which they are constructed or used. Hence, I have argued that our anthropological consciousness of objects of study and their comparability pertain to concrete situations of participant-observation. Our comparisons derive from cognitive constructions made within particular interactions (defining entities), our journeying between them (identifying classes) and then, as we author accounts, our connecting these moments and evaluations into an imaginable whole.

Moreover, I have argued that it is especially apposite that as anthropology searches for better ways to admit to the fieldwork experience, to reveal the micropolitics of ethnography, notice be taken of the novelist and the novel: that here can be found echoes of the way the ethnographer constructs and recounts her experience. For both novelist and ethnographer are focal figures who draw knowledge out of personal happenstance, decide upon the nature of particular characters, episodes and circumstances in their texts, and construe their interconnections. But more than this, I can turn to Forster for an image of comparison by which a social world of endlessly diverse and yet complementary perspectives can be depicted, and its cognitive encompassment (by protagonists, by narrator, by author) accounted for, because as a supreme social novelist he, too, is engaged in detailed and critical observation of the manners and mores of a society in which he is simultaneously a participant. Novelist and ethnographer may address different conventions, the ethnographer usually representing herself as less omniscient and more accountable (more the presenter of other people’s plots), writing in order to demonstrate, promote and exchange expertise in a more technical forum. Nonetheless, both she and the novelist are wrapped up in their material, immersed in interpretation, in similar ways.

22 [as note 7]. 52.
In conclusion, a post-structuralist world may indeed provide the comparative anthropologist with a multiplicity of competing epistemologies, a procession of versions, but the integrity of the single ethnographer's experiences in the field can still furnish description which compares, and connects comparisons, even as it is stipulated how subjective, how situational and metaphorical, this must be.\footnote{I am grateful to Paul Baxter, Richard Fardon, Marilyn Strathern and Jimmy Weiner for their comments on this paper.}