

Mareike Glier

The Cultural Work of Form in Elisabeth Elliot's Writing:

Exploring Narrative Modes and Cultural Models of  
Life Writing in the Contact Zone

Ansgar Nünning, Vera Nünning, Norbert Finzsch (Hg.)

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Any book, including the novel and the biography, is the product of its author. Implicit within the book, to a greater or less degree, are the author’s identity, his vision of reality, his understanding of life” (Elliot, *WSA* xi). One might wonder whether Elisabeth Elliot’s words on the biography might not also be true for the genre of the dissertation. Examining the work of cultural models in Elisabeth Elliot’s texts, this dissertation simultaneously engages in the creation of an academic narrator, who sorts through and tests different literary, cultural, and academic models and approaches, bringing her past experiences and worldviews to the analysis. More aware of the cultural work of forms for writing life, this preface attempts to provide an insight into my academic journey of the past several years when the idea to work on Elisabeth Elliot’s texts first appeared as a topic for my master’s thesis and then during the next years extended into a larger project covering fourteen of Elliot’s works with respect to their forms’ cultural work. On this journey several persons cheered me on from the sidelines and supported me in countless different ways (Levine would call this network). Writing the acknowledgements, I realize that this form affords an attitude of thankfulness, which I would like to express in the following paragraphs.

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Karlsruhe 2021  
Mareike Glier (née Zapp)

## LIST OF SHORT TITLES

- Account** *An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd, Minister of the Gospel, Missionary to the Indians, From the Honourable Society in Scotland, for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, and Pastor of a Church of Christian Indians in New-Jersey* (1749) by Jonathan Edwards
- Biblical Researches** *Biblical Researches in Palestine, Mount Sinai and Arabia Petræa* (1841) by Edward Robinson
- Furnace** *Furnace of the Lord: Reflections on the Redemption of the Holy City* (1969a) by Elisabeth Elliot
- Gates** *Through Gates of Splendor* (2005 [1957]) by Elisabeth Elliot
- Growth** *Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission: The Growth of a Work of God* (1921 [1918]) by Frederick Howard Taylor and Mary Geraldine Taylor
- Incidents** *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petræa, and the Holy Land* (1839 [1837]) by John Lloyd Stephens
- Innocents** *The Innocents Abroad: Or, The New Pilgrims' Progress* (1869) by Mark Twain
- J.B. Phillips** *J.B. Phillips New Testament* (1972)
- KJV** *Holy Bible. King James Version* (n.d.)
- Lamp** *A Lamp for My Feet: The Bible's Light for Daily Living* (1985) by Elisabeth Elliot
- Land** *The Land and the Book: Or, Biblical Illustrations Drawn from the Manners and Customs, the Scenes and Scenery of the Holy Land* (1858–1859) by William M. Thomson
- Liberty** *The Liberty of Obedience: Some Thoughts on Christian Conduct and Service* (1968a) by Elisabeth Elliot
- Love** *Love Has a Price Tag* (1979) by Elisabeth Elliot
- Memoir** *Memoir of Adoniram Judson: Being a Sketch of his Life and Missionary Labors* (1852) by Jesse Clement
- Mighty Army** *'Like a Mighty Army.' R. Kenneth Strachan and the Global March of Evangelism-in-Depth* (1998) by W. Dayton Roberts
- Music** *The Music of His Promises: Listening to God with Love, Trust, and Obedience* (2000) by Elisabeth Elliot
- NGI** *No Graven Image* (1997 [1966]) by Elisabeth Elliot
- NIV** *Holy Bible. New International Version* (2011)

- On Asking*** *On Asking God Why: Reflections on Trusting God* (1989) by Elisabeth Elliot
- Parables*** *Parables of the Cross* (1890) by I. Lilius Trotter
- Path*** *A Path Through Suffering: Discovering the Relationship between God's Mercy and Our Pain* (1990) by Elisabeth Elliot
- Quiet Heart*** *Keep a Quiet Heart* (1995) by Elisabeth Elliot
- RSV*** *Holy Bible. Revised Standard Version* (1971)
- Savage*** *The Savage My Kinsman* (1992 [1961]) by Elisabeth Elliot
- Secure*** *Secure in the Everlasting Arms* (2002) by Elisabeth Elliot
- Shadow*** *Shadow of the Almighty: The Life and Testament of Jim Elliot* (1958a) by Elisabeth Elliot
- Strachan*** *Strachan of Costa Rica: Missionary Insights and Strategies* (1971) by W. Dayton Roberts
- Strange*** *These Strange Ashes: Is God Still in Charge?* (1998 [1975]) by Elisabeth Elliot
- Triumph*** *The Triumph of John and Betty Stam* (1935) by Mary Geraldine Taylor
- Twelve Baskets*** *Twelve Baskets of Crumbs* (1977 [1976]) by Elisabeth Elliot
- WSA*** *Who Shall Ascend: The Life of R. Kenneth Strachan of Costa Rica* (1968b) by Elisabeth Elliot
- Yqnomamö*** *Yqnomamö: The Fierce People* (1968) by Napoleon A. Chagnon



## I. INTRODUCTION: ELISABETH ELLIOT AND THE STUDY OF CULTURE

American<sup>1</sup> missionary Elisabeth Elliot became a well-known writer overnight when her first book *Through Gates of Splendor* (from here on *Gates*) became a bestseller in 1957. Over a period of eight months the publisher sold over 175,000 copies (Long 2019: 41). However, even though Elliot embraced her new career path and continued to publish over twenty works in the course of her life, the initiation into the writing profession was rather sudden and unexpected. After her husband's death in Ecuador, Elliot flew to the United States, expecting to help revise a manuscript that was supposed to tell the story of her husband and four other American missionaries' project to contact the indigenous Huaorani of the Amazon (eastern Ecuador), which ended in the missionaries' deaths.<sup>2</sup> However, at her arrival Elliot learned that the manuscript did not yet exist and spent the following months composing it from scratch (ibid.: 36). Based on actual events that had taken place one year prior, *Gates* continued the narrative of *Life* magazine's article "'Go Ye and Preach the Gospel': Five Do and Die," which had used large portions of the missionaries' private journals. Similar to the article, *Gates* used the missionaries' direct voices to cater to the sensationalism of the American middle class, who had followed the search in the media and identified with the family values portrayed in the story (Long 2003b: 229). As previous missionary narratives, *Gates*'s focus lay on suffering and redemption.

Like *Gates*, Elliot's 1958 biography of her husband Jim Elliot, entitled *Shadow of the Almighty: The Life and Testament of Jim Elliot* (from here on *Shadow*), followed a redemptive storyline, while *The Savage My Kinsman* (1961, from here on *Savage*) explored new forms. Similar to *Gates*, *Savage* was more or less improvised. Elliot had prepared a photo series during the first year of living among the Huaorani in 1958/59, just two and a half years after her husband's death, when her publisher demanded a complete book-length report of her time there (*Savage* 143). Considerably less popular than *Gates* or *Shadow*, *Savage* used different narrative forms to express Elliot's experiences with the

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<sup>1</sup> This study employs the term 'American' to refer to the United States rather than the continent as a whole. To specify, the study uses 'North American' for the United States and Canada, and 'Central America' and 'South America' for countries south of the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Interfamilial conflicts and fear of attack had moved the Huaorani to strike and eliminate their potential enemies (Long 2019: 19).

Huaorani. Exploring ethnographic forms of participation-observation, *Savage* turns self-reflective when asking questions about perspective, cultural superiority, and redemption. Elliot's novel *No Graven Image* (1966, from here on *NGI*) continues these questions when experimenting with different narrative forms and literary modes, infusing them with Quichua ways of storytelling.

The experimentations with forms in *Savage* and *NGI* had an impact on Elliot's later writing, especially her biographies, travel writing, and essays. But what do these explorations of forms afford? Why are these choices of form relevant for life writing in the contact zone? This study argues that different forms carry different potential for cultural work. Especially in life writing in the contact zone, different communities and their cultural models meet and interact. In this context, individuals use cognitive structures to translate new cultural experiences into meaning with the help of cognitive cultural schemas. These processes are negotiated and verbalized in narrative forms. In turn, different narrative forms result in diverging cultural work. While teleological plots might foster integration of paradoxical experiences into an existing cultural model, repetitive or networking structures might challenge easy connections. Accordingly, Elliot's diverse narrative forms achieve different cultural ends. Combining theoretical approaches from cognitive anthropology, cultural narratology, and cultural formalism, this study sets out to examine the cultural work of Elliot's narrative forms. In this context, the study is interested in laying bare the cognitive processes that take place in the contact zone and are mediated in the narrative forms of life writing. In order to do so, the following subsection presents the relevance of investigating Elliot's texts for research in the study of culture, followed by an introduction of conceptual approaches to culture and narratives in the contact zone. The subsequent section establishes the study's definition of life writing as an overarching concept before outlining the study's premises, methodology, and structure.

### 1. Relevancy of Elisabeth Elliot's Writing for the Study of Culture: Current State of Research and Historical Contextualization

One might be tempted to wonder about the relevance of a single writer for the study of culture. What are the specificities of Elisabeth Elliot's writings when investigating the impact of forms on the development and negotiations of cultural models in the contact zone? Most pertinent for the answer to this question are three factors: Diversity, situatedness, and referentiality. First, the vast array of forms in Elliot's writing—ranging from hagiographic to fictional and essayistic forms—allow the examination of different affordances of forms with regard to