

Carole McGranahan, ed., *Writing Anthropology: Essays on Craft and Commitment*

Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. 309 pages, 12 black and white illustrations. Paperback, \$27.95. ISBN 9781478008125.

Anthropologists write—that is what we do when we are not teaching or giving talks. We write applications, fieldnotes, analytic memos, reports, articles, op-ed pieces, books, or blogs. Despite the central place of writing for our *métier*, anthropologists have not consistently discussed writing as a craft. We had, and still have, our share of gifted writers; there are forums in which enthusiasts committed to a humanistic style of anthropology share their writing; and we have had a narrative and a literary turn in the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, few anthropology departments nurture writing as practice and part of the analytic process. However, the times are changing if the increasing number of publications on anthropology and writing is anything to go by. *Writing Anthropology: Essays on Craft and Commitment* is the latest in a string of books that have come out in recent years (see for example Narayan 2012; Nielsen and Rapport 2017; Pandian and McLean 2017; Wulff 2016).

No less than fifty-two anthropologists have contributed to this volume, the majority of whom are university faculty members. Some are distinguished writers, but there are also fresh voices among the contributors. Earlier versions of most of the texts have appeared in the group blog “Savage Minds: Notes and Queries in Anthropology,” a central forum of the North American anthropological community.

In her introduction, Carole McGranahan shares her reflections and advice on anthropological writing as an ethical practice and a practical matter before presenting each essay. There are fifty-three essays organized in ten sections: “Ruminations,” “Writing Ideas,” “Telling Stories,” “On Responsibility,” “The Urgency of Now,” “Writing With, Writing Against,” “Academic Authors,” “Ethnographic Genres,” “Becoming and Belonging,” and “Writing and Knowing.” Each section contains five or six essays of 1,000–1,500 words.

“Ruminations,” section 1, contains several treats. One such is “List as Form” by Sasha Su-Ling Welland, a must for any student’s must-read-before-fieldwork list. This list should also include Lia Sang-Mi Min’s “Freeze-Dried Memory Crumbs: Field Notes from North Korea.” Turning lists and crumbs into readable text is not easy. Paul Stoller offers one possible path in “Finding Your Way,” in which he shares how he found his as a writer using narrative to evoke universal themes in human life and connect to readers or listeners. The worth of a list or crumbs depends upon the words chosen rather than length or volume. In “When Do Words Count?,” Kirin Narayan asks this tongue-in-cheek in her comment on the tendency to talk about our work in terms of numbers and shows just why this is absurd. This essay reminds us that writing does not have to be sad or earnest to touch readers—laughter can be powerful too.

“Writing Ideas,” section 2, has, as the title suggests, sound advice for students as well as their teachers. “Pro Tips for Academic Writing” by C. Anne Claus should be mandatory reading for first-year students. “Read More, Write Less,” suggests Ruth Behar, who points readers to anthropologists one can learn from, but as she also rightly insists “to make words sing” fiction, poetry, memoir, or children’s books should be on one’s shelf too. Personally, I would never have written anything if I had depended on Kristen Ghodsee’s list in “My Ten Steps for Writing a Book.” McGranahan notes that she always started with a story that needed to be told in her essay “Telling Stories,” section 3. But writers

are different, and while some need a story to find their muse, others may find a highly structured approach useful.

Reading through the essays in “The Urgency of Now,” section 5, on writing to engage with unfolding events, and “Writing With, Writing Against,” section 6, on the role affect and emotion play in our writing, there can be no doubt about the commitment, whether it is to interlocutors, a cause, anthropology, or ethnographic writing. For a few authors in section 6, however, their commitment comes at the cost of their writing—shouting is rarely convincing.

Why should anthropologists bother reading poetry? Naomi Stone and Stuart McLean’s essays in “Ethnographic Genres,” section 8, show what we can gain if we experiment with poetry or at least some of its tools that can lead readers closer to the lived experiences of others. An art Kathleen Stewart and Lauren Berlant master, as evident in “Dilations,” in which they transfer readers to other worlds, as glimpsed in encounters with an enraged neighbor or a frightened bulimic student. Is this ethnography or perhaps fiction? Jessica Marie Falcone and Ruth Behar’s essays complement each other and will serve well as a basis for the time students raise this question in class.

In “Writing as Cognition,” in “Writing and Knowing,” section 10, Barak Kalir insists that our arguments take shape through writing. This is writing as a path to understanding. In “Thinking through the Untranslatable,” Kevin Carrico urges academics to spend more time in contemplation instead of incessant writing. Some phenomena, he suggests, take us beyond words. He has a point. But what is searching for—and perhaps failing to find—words, if not an act of contemplation? Perhaps we should write more but publish less. Imagine academia if we were allowed to publish only once every second year.

Aimed at different groups of readers and with distinct errands, the book is bursting at the seams. I would have preferred a closely interwoven series of shorter books, one on writing as a craft, another on collaboration, and a third on commitment. As it stands, some texts reduce writing to a means for a larger purpose. Writing is more than a serving tool to anthropology; paradoxically we will have to acknowledge this to do anthropology a service.

Would I nevertheless recommend it for teaching? I am currently planning a series of ethnographic writing workshops in our department and yes, this will be one of the books we use. It contains several essays that are a pleasure to read—graceful with a clear purpose, uncluttered, and free of jargon—and a few that left me cold, dispirited, and looking for a red pen. Compassion unfortunately does not guarantee good writing. Reading different kinds of ethnographic writing, however, in a format that allows for easy comparison might stimulate reflection on writing and help students find their own voice. That in itself would be an accomplishment.

REFERENCES

- Narayan, Kirin. 2012. *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nielsen, Morten, and Nigel Rapport. 2017. *The Composition of Anthropology: How Anthropological Texts Are Written*. London: Routledge.
- Pandian, Anand, and Stuart McLean. 2017. *Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Wulff, Helena. 2016. *The Anthropologist as Writer: Genres and Contexts in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Helle Bundgaard
University of Copenhagen