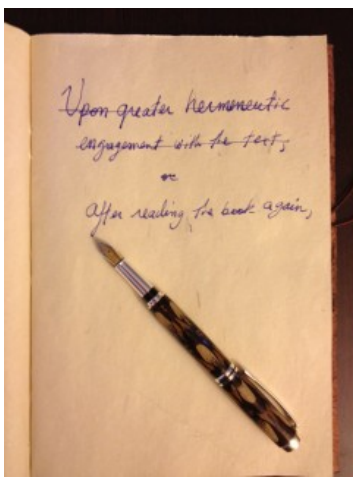


SOCIETY FOR HUMANISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Writing Ethnographies that Ordinary People Can Read

Kristen Ghodsee



Syntagmatic analysts unite. Photo courtesy Kristen Ghodsee

"I've often been accused of making anthropology into literature, but anthropology is also field research. Writing is central to it." – Clifford Geertz

"Anthropology will continue to get a bad rap as long as we anthropologists think and write about the human condition in obtuse ways." – Paul Stoller

Clifford Geertz once contrasted the art of fiction with the craft of "faction," a type of writing that wrapped social scientific truth claims in polished and accessible prose. Ethnographic monographs once enjoyed popular audiences because earlier generations of scholars were committed to writing ethnographic texts that were as beautifully written as they were analytically incisive.

These earlier texts often employed "thick description" to give texture and vibrancy to the anthropologist's taxonomical classifications of "culture." They selectively incorporated literary devices, such as dialogue and narrative tension, into their books and journal articles to help render foreign worlds intelligible. If Ruth Benedict was right that the purpose of anthropology was "to make the world safe for human differences," then narrative ethnographic forms should be of a primary means for disseminating knowledge to students and non-specialists outside of the narrow professional confines of our discipline.

Readable ethnographies suffered a devastating blow with the 1985 publication of James Clifford and George Marcus's *Writing Culture*, a book that exposed the uncomfortably imperialistic nature of the anthropologist-informant relationship and the sticky ethical issues involved in literary renderings of non-Western cultures. In a 2008 interview in *Cultural Anthropology*, George Marcus claimed that his discipline had not yet recovered from the critique launched in *Writing Culture*, and that there were "no new ideas" in anthropology and "none on the horizon."

The self-reflexive paralysis that followed *Writing Culture* has contributed to the production of ethnographic texts that are little more than private, theoretical discussions among scholars of specific sub-disciplines. Too often the members of the communities who are being studied cannot understand what is being written about them. Many cultural anthropologists have embraced an obscurantist language to express even the most basic ideas. Like lawyers writing business contracts so convoluted that only other lawyers can decipher them, it sometimes seems that scholars have intentionally developed "academese" in order to insulate their work from the scrutiny of those outside the discipline.

Fortunately, there have always been more experimental forms of research and writing in the discipline of anthropology, and recently there seems to be a resurgence of interest in "narrative ethnography" or "literary ethnography." Yet these new forms are not being embraced by the mainstream scholarly culture of anthropology. Ethnographic texts that do not traffic in jargon and neologisms often find themselves marginalized as not "theoretical" enough. Many of the books submitted for the Society of Humanistic Anthropology's annual Turner Prize come from smaller academic presses and are written by scholars outside of the major research universities. Furthermore, editors at the traditional publication venues for cultural anthropologists do not yet know what to make of experimental ethnographic texts. Some journals will automatically reject articles that do not conform to specific stylistic standards. Narrative ethnographic styles have few scholarly platforms despite their growing popularity among both junior and senior anthropologists.

An emerging school of Deleuzian anthropology has encouraged us to view anthropology as a social art rather than a social science, an art form which is "continually adjusting itself to the reality of contemporary lives and worlds." In their 2009 *Annual Review of Anthropology* article, João Biehl and Amy Moran-Thomas claim that:

[A]nthropology has a unique disciplinary potential to contribute to commentaries on the power of narrative art that have largely emerged from reflections on literary giants. For while Lacan builds on Joyce and Deleuze draws on Kafka, we as anthropologists have a distinct task: Our curiosity can meet what remains to be known as we bring back the everyday stories and writing of characters that might otherwise remain forgotten, with attention to the ways

give form to people's own painstaking arts of living and the unexpected potentials they create, and from the descriptive work of giving these observed tensions an equally powerful force in their own accounting (282).

Any move toward an anthropology of the subjective will require new forms of writing and presenting "data," forms that will inevitably break with the over proscribed empiricism demanded by most mainstream academic journals. Inspired by recent trends in what has been called "creative nonfiction," experimental narrative ethnography is a new and emerging genre (albeit with strong links to previous generations of ethnographic writing) that demands a place in the contemporary landscape of ethnographic knowledge production. Somewhere between ethnographic fiction and poetry and the social scientific conventions of the scholarly book or journal article, there is a middle ground for the experimental narrative ethnography.

The [Society for Humanistic Anthropology](#) (SHA) has long been a home for anthropologists willing to think outside of the box. The Victor Turner Prize has been recognizing exceptional ethnographic writing every year since 1990, and SHA has been awarding prizes for ethnographic fiction and poetry since the late 1980s. As ethnographic writing styles evolve and change, SHA will continue to be the section in the American Anthropological Association where scholars, students, and practitioners can come to talk about the craft of writing.

Hopefully, there will develop a critical mass of scholars working with experimental narrative ethnographic forms. Then university presses, journal editors, and tenure and promotion committees will have to sit up and take notice. Through our workshops, special events, writers groups and scholarly panels, SHA hopes to encourage continued discussion and debate on the value and purpose of, and perhaps on the growing necessity for, more experimental ethnographic texts.

Kristen Ghodsee (kghodsee@bowdoin.edu) and *Rose Wellman* (rew3p@virginia.edu) are the contributing editors for SHA's column in Anthropology News.

Share this:

Facebook 135

Twitter 55

Google

LinkedIn 3

Email

This entry was posted in [May, Section News](#) and tagged [Society for Humanistic Anthropology](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). [Post a comment](#) or leave a [trackback](#): [Trackback URL](#).