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How to write? Experiences, challenges and
possibilities of ethnographic writing

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Introduction

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Abstract

Ethnography, as text, is the main outcome of fieldwork. It is also the most important way in which anthropologists communicate and share their findings. As a consequence, despite substantial critique by postmodern anthropology on how ethnographic texts in the past have represented the reality and life-worlds of others, ethnographic writing remains at the centre of the anthropological enterprise. But how to write? The so-called Writing Culture debate, together with feminist and postcolonial approaches, has stimulated new ways to do and write ethnography. But where much has been published on how to master fieldwork, it is still hard to find advice on how to go 'from notes to narratives' (Ghodsee 2016) and write a convincing ethnography. This special issue brings together a diverse range of contributions on how to write ethnography. Contributors reflect on ethical challenges, including issues of confidentiality and questions of representation. Writing is discussed as a way to construct and deconstruct truth(s). Temporalities of ethnographic writing are scrutinised and different writing styles, like vignettes and portraits, are introduced. Engagement with other modes of representation and storytelling, like film-making and photography, pushes beyond the written medium. The special issue concludes with two contributions on how to teach and learn ethnographic writing.

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Introduction

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How to write ethnography?

Moving from fieldwork to writing is one of the key challenges of being an ethnographer. Two recent introductions on ethnographic writing (Gullion 2016; Wulff 2016b) describe the disconcerting moment in which the ethnographer, sitting in front of the computer, wonders how to transform experience into text. Helena Wulff (2016b: 1) captures the moment spatially, as a movement from one place to another:

There you are: facing the computer screen. Your 'field', whatever that was, is some distance away, at least for now. You have worked through the materials you collected there, and think you have them in a promising order. Time for the next step: to write.

Jessica Smartt Gullion (2016: xi) adds a layer of anxiety: 'The only thing left for you to do is write it up. You create a blank document on your computer. The cursor flashes on the screen. *Shit*. You freeze. Your mind as empty as the page'. Although most ethnographers can probably relate to these descriptions, until recently advice on how to get started and what to consider when writing ethnography was not easy to find.

Until the 1980s, few anthropologists commented publicly on how they wrote their ethnographies. Their struggles, and maybe also their pleasures, of writing ethnographies remained largely unknown. John van Maanen captured this attitude towards writing in the preface to his seminal book *Tales of the Field*, first published in 1988 and with a second edition in 2011. Returning from fieldwork, he was instructed to 'write up' what he had 'discovered in the field' (Van Maanen 2011: xvi). At the time, advice on forms and styles of ethnographic writing were almost non-existent. Like many others, he relied on reading to gain inspiration, on trial and error, and on the advice of friends. Van Maanen's work is part of the larger Writing Culture movement (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Zenker and Kumoll 2010) of the 1980s and 1990s. Through a critical analysis of his own and other anthropologists' ethnographic writings, Van Maanen meticulously outlines three major forms (or tales) of cultural representation – realist tales, confessional tales, and impressionist tales. One must applaud Van Maanen and his tales of the field that have made ethnographic writing so much more transparent for later generations of ethnographers.

During the 1980s, postmodern anthropologists increasingly questioned how ‘others’ were being researched and portrayed through ethnography. Critical evaluations, sometimes deconstructions, of ethnographic texts went hand in hand with experiments in different forms of ethnographic writing. New epistemological perspectives on the limits and possibilities of cultural knowledge led to innovative ways of writing (Schnegg 2014). Feminist anthropologists, such as Ruth Behar, used ethnography, and sometimes autoethnography, to voice life-worlds that had previously been muted (Behar 1993, 1996; Behar and Gordon 1995). Paul Stoller (1989, 1997) highlighted the relevance of the senses in experiencing culture and integrated them into his sensuous ethnographic writing. With their new ways of writing, scholars like Behar and Stoller deliberately blurred the boundaries between academic and literary writing. Not all anthropologists agreed with this. Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1994: 194), for example, cautioned against indulgence in the ‘rich and evocative language of creative writing’ as this could lead to the loss of anthropology’s scholarly identity and ‘anthropology would cease being an academic discipline’.

Today one can find a diverse range of ethnographic writing styles. In the last few years, a remarkable number of publications has addressed the question of ethnographic writing (Atkinson 2020; Bock 2019; Ghodsee 2016; Gullion 2016; McGranahan 2020; Narayan 2012; Nielsen and Rapport 2018; Waterston and Vesperi 2009; Wulff 2016a). In 2016 anthropologists Helena Wulff and Deborah Reed-Danahay initiated the Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology series that explores ‘ethnography of fiction, ethnographic fiction, narrative ethnography, creative nonfiction, memoir, autoethnography, and the connections between travel literature and ethnographic writing’.¹ The last decades have thus seen a significant shift from the restrained manner in which anthropologists had to deal with issues of writing – such as Alma Gottlieb (2016: 96) who, when applying for tenure, did not mention the ‘too literary’ book *Parallel Worlds* she had co-authored with Philip Graham (Gottlieb and Graham 1994) – to the ease with which ethnographers like Francis Nyamnjoh (2008, 2011) or Ellen Wiles (2017, 2020) are able to switch between and mix fiction and ethnography.

Despite these stimulating new ways of thinking and writing ethnography, I want to suggest that, overall, innovative and often experimental approaches and styles of writing have had an only moderate effect on mainstream ethnographic writing. In fact, the writing style of many contemporary ethnographies does not substantially differ from the ethnographic texts Van Maanen discussed almost forty years ago. Even more surprising, a broader discussion on how to write and how to evaluate the quality of ethnographic texts continues to be largely absent in the discipline. Obviously, not all ethno-

1 See the Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology webpage, <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/15120> [accessed: 4 December 2020].

graphic writing can count as good writing. During the peer review process, for example, it is rather common that reviewers, following Clifford Geertz's (1973) metaphor of 'thick description', comment on the quality of the ethnographic account as 'thin', 'shallow', 'superficial', or 'lacking depth'. On what basis are these judgements formed? What makes an ethnographic description 'thick and deep'? What quality and/or quantity of information is needed to move from thin to thick? Whilst much has been published on how to master fieldwork, advice on how to write a convincing ethnography and get 'from notes to narratives' (Ghodsee 2016) is still rare (see also Narayan 2012). This indicates that the perception that ethnographic writing is the simple process of 'writing up the field notes', without much consideration and stylistic fuzz, continues to be widespread in the discipline. One of the central aims of this special issue is to stimulate more engagement with the crafting and quality of ethnographic texts.

Another challenge in accessing and discussing the quality of ethnographic writing consists in the complex empirical and ethical grounding of ethnographic texts (McGranahan 2020). Unlike writers of fiction, ethnographers depend on others for everything they write (Wiles 2020). 'Where novelists imagine, ethnographers must observe', Kristen Ghodsee accurately points out (2016: 38; see also Fassin 2014: 53). Without 'the people', whoever they are, no ethnographic text could be written. In an interview in 1999, Nancy Scheper-Hughes describes this complex constellation of authorship:

Ethnographic writing is an art form of its own, and it combines description with an ear for the cadences of language, for the odd way that people put things, and the sense that so many of the people we deal with are organic intellectuals who have not had the opportunity to explain to someone outside the village why life proceeds the way it is. So I often work with people who would have been anthropologists if they had been trained to do it, but they didn't have the opportunity. They intuit almost – not immediately, but can learn very quickly what this is about and then they begin to help me and begin to say, here's something you need to see. Or they'll sit down with me and reflect on it. So I can't say where the writing comes from, but I can say that in a sense all anthropological ethnographies are written by a host of people who have pointed us in the direction. (Kreisler 2000: 6)

Scheper-Hughes has written highly compelling ethnographies (for example, Scheper-Hughes 1992). Her honesty in describing how she gets from fieldwork to deskwork showcases a myriad of ethical and literary challenges ethnographers face when becoming authors. How much credit should be given to the 'organic intellectuals' of fieldwork, as she calls them? Should there not be more shared authorship in ethnographic publications (Dawids et al.

2007; Pauli and Dawids 2017)? What happens if not all of the field's intellectuals agree with how they or their views are represented in ethnographic texts? Not surprisingly then, questions of authorship and representation have become crucial for ethnographic writing since the Writing Culture debate. Acknowledging these challenges whilst at the same time appreciating different (written) ways of dealing with them informs the various contributions to this special issue.

Outline of the special issue: from challenges to possibilities of ethnographic writing

The twelve contributions (plus a commentary and a reply) of the special issue address experiences, challenges, and possibilities of ethnographic writing. My aim has been to bring together a diverse range of perspectives on ethnographic writing. To accomplish this, the length of the contributions varies. Authors had the option either to write full length articles or to contribute with shorter pieces. I arranged the contributions into four sections, the first three looking at the challenges, possibilities, and extensions of ethnographic writing, and the last at learning to write ethnography.

The first section tackles ethical challenges of ethnographic writing. The contributions span a broad range of issues that arise when one turns fieldwork into text. Whilst the first two contributions scrutinise questions of representation, the other two reflect on the (im)possibilities of knowing the truth in ethnographic research and writing. The section opens with an article by Julia Vorhölder in which she discusses one of the most crucial questions of ethnographic writing – what she calls ethnography's Achilles heel – the question of confidentiality. Based on a meticulous review of the literature on anonymisation and her own long-term fieldwork experiences in Uganda and South Africa, she depicts and critically discusses different approaches of using and not using pseudonyms. With great honesty, Vorhölder tells us about her own decisions and the moral dilemmas and struggles that have resulted from them. Her paper is followed by a commentary by Sjaak van der Geest to which she then offers a reply. Van der Geest has been amongst the first anthropologists to reflect on and experiment with anonymisation (Bleek 1976; van der Geest 2003). Initially, I had asked him to peer review the Vorhölder paper. Yet after reading it, van der Geest suggested to move away from the anonymity of a peer review and instead to debate questions of anonymity and confidentiality publicly. I appreciate his willingness to contribute to the issue in this manner, and Vorhölder's readiness to engage with his critique, as I am convinced that the exchange offers insightful reflections on confidentiality and deepens the debate. Thinking about my own imperfect decisions whether and when to use pseudonyms, I am certain that Vorhölder's and van

der Geest's contributions will stimulate a much-needed engagement with the intended and unintended consequences of anonymisation.

The article by Eva Riedke tackles another substantial ethical dilemma when writing ethnography. Self-reflectively scrutinising that leaving the field physically does not mean leaving the field socially, Riedke describes how she and her research were entangled in a cycle of hitman killings that took place on the outskirts of Durban, South Africa. Riedke takes as point of departure the demand to make her ethnographic material available for a trial against the hitmen and discusses in detail the ethical conundrums this led to whilst writing. She beautifully captures this process with the image of an 'inner dialogue' between field and desk.

The second two papers of this section expand the discussion of ethical dilemmas in writing ethnography by focusing on the (im)possibilities of truth and (factual) knowledge. Lena Kroeker's contribution takes us to South Africa and the death of a newborn. In her attempt to reconstruct what had happened to the baby, Kroeker interviewed the young mother, her mother-in-law, a midwife, and a paediatrician. Confronted with contradictory narratives and the impossibility of reaching a conclusive explanation for the events, Kroeker describes how the different renderings of what happened fostered her understanding of each narrator's present situation and how they related to each other. She encourages us to view contradictions in narratives less as *challenges* and more as *chances* for ethnographic writing.

Rounding off this section is Dumitrița Luncă who asks what it means for ethnographic research and writing when interlocutors themselves embellish, hide, or lie. Reflecting on her experiences with pitching a story to a narrative journalism magazine whilst doing fieldwork with Romanian migrants in Rome, she investigates whether ethnographers should try to verify the veracity of what they are being told. Luncă's contribution provides thought-provoking insights into how to understand truths, half-truths, and un-truths in ethnographic writing.

The second section takes us from the challenges to the possibilities of ethnographic writing. The first contribution is the broadest in scope of the four papers. Before becoming an anthropologist, Mira Menzfeld worked as a journalist. This professional background raised her awareness for reader-friendly writing styles. Like Ghodsee (2016), she provides transparent and practical advice on how to craft and revise ethnographic texts, including remarks on formulation, argumentation, *pars pro toto* scenes, and the use of symbols and metaphors. In her inspiring contribution, she emphasises that a recipient-friendly ethnographic style is vital for the public engagement of anthropologists.

The next three papers concentrate on individual stylistic devices and narratives of ethnographic writing. Svenja Schöneich focuses on the use of ethnographic vignettes. Vignettes are narrative descriptions of particular

scenes that took place during the fieldwork. They are much more than mere stylistic adornments. Schöneich demonstrates with an ethnographic vignette from her own fieldwork in Mexico that they can also be tools to reach analytical conclusions. Like Menzfeld, Schöneich provides hands-on advice on how to write a convincing vignette.

Rosalie Stolz draws on a brief ethnographic incident in north-western Laos –rumours circulating about an antidote to the impending coronavirus disease – to demonstrate how fleeting encounters in the field can bring unforeseen topics and phenomena to the fieldworker’s attention. In her nuanced contribution, Stolz encourages us to include such contingent encounters and their unfolding in our ethnographic writing. In resonance with Kroeker’s contribution, Stolz shows how allowing for the contingent and unfinished prevents epistemic closure.

In the final paper of this section, Mijal Gandelsman-Trier thinks through issues of authorship and authority in ethnographic writing. She describes in detail how one of her interlocutors, whom she describes as a resolute elderly woman, gave her authoritative information on the history of Ciudad Vieja, the historic centre of Montevideo, Uruguay. Subtly and gently Gandelsman-Trier unravels how she dealt with the impetus of the interviewee’s narrative when she began to write about it. In line with Schöneich’s suggestion, Gandelsman-Trier went beyond using her interlocutor’s account as simple source of information but embedded her statements in a vignette.

The two papers in the third section examine how one could extend and widen ethnographic writing with other forms of representation. Cati Coe compares and contrasts writing to film-making. Based on her own in-depth experiences with ethnographic writing and film-making in Ghana and the United States of America, Coe observes that films have the ability of reaching larger audiences, including the fieldworker’s interlocutors. But films struggle with portraying broader context or showcasing stories that do not have an interesting visual component. Her thorough comparison of the two modes of storytelling illuminates the strengths and drawbacks of ethnographic writing. Based on her experience with writing three monographs and making two short documentaries on the same themes, Coe concludes that film does not replace writing: writing and film-making work in tandem.

The second contribution in this section, by Gbeognin Mickael Hounbedji, considers the use of photographs for ethnographic research and writing. In his highly original contribution, Hounbedji takes a twenty-four-year-old family photograph as starting point for reflecting on the multidimensionality of representations. The photograph was taken in Benin and pictures himself with several childhood friends and their kin. With great ethnographic depth, Hounbedji unravels how a multiplicity of topics – orphans, kinship fostering, schooling, and craft apprenticeship – frame the meaning of the photo-

graph. Like Coe's contribution, Hounghbedji's article encourages us to enrich our ethnographic writing with other forms of representation.

This special issue concludes with a final section on teaching and learning ethnographic writing. I am convinced that an ongoing dialogue about challenges and possibilities of ethnographic writing must include pedagogical questions and student voices. In my own contribution, I reflect on my experiences with teaching ethnographic writing to graduate anthropology students over the last decade. My teaching is underlined by the endeavour of encouraging students to read (more) ethnographies, reflect on writing styles, and work on their own writing in groups and by themselves.

My contribution on teaching ethnographic writing is complemented by the reflection of one of my students of what it meant to be a recipient of this teaching and to learn how to write in a guided manner. Charlot Schneider observes that although there is an emphasis on academic writing at universities, little attention tends to be given to ethnographic writing. Drawing on her own experiences as student in a series of ethnographic writing seminars, she considers what kind of environment is needed to develop writing confidence and skills. She pinpoints three conditions in particular: freedom, experimentation, and collaboration. In conclusion, Schneider advocates for more space to experiment with different writing styles, figurative techniques, and narrations during anthropological training.

The contributions in this special issue bring together a broad range of experiences, challenges, and possibilities of ethnographic writing. All of them show that ethnographic writing, the core of our discipline, must be critically scrutinised but also benevolently appreciated.

I conclude with a reflection on the cover of this special issue. Michael Pröpper, anthropologist and painter, generously allowed me to use his painting *Reis auf Schrift* (rice on writing) as cover for this special issue. The painting beautifully captures what ethnography as practice and text is about. Peasants are working in a paddy field. Their work is demanding – the knees are flexed, the backs bent over. In the background, the paddy field transforms into a written text. The text has been copied from a Tibetan restaurant menu. The letters remind us that the rice harvested by the peasants will eventually be eaten. Our fieldwork, in a way, is also a collective harvesting. It is our responsibility to make the fruits of fieldwork, our ethnographic writing, and the experience of consuming them as enriching as possible.

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