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Uncovering Creative Writing in Anthropology

MELISA CAHNMANN AND TERI HOLBROOK
U GEORGIA

Writing serves multiple purposes in anthropology. Through writing we craft questions, record observations, analyze data and report findings. However, the art of writing is seldom an explicit topic of discussion. Like Clifford and Marcus in *Writing Culture* (1986) and Behar in *The Vulnerable Observer* (1996), our work builds on the premise that anthropologists generally and ethnographers specifically have much to gain from an exploration of the craft and practice of creative writing as a method of inquiry. As a poet and fiction writer, we bring the rhythm and imagination of creative writing to our anthropological fieldwork in education. What can fiction and poetry do that more traditional genres might not during data collection, analysis and presentation?

Art/Antropology

Creative writers and anthropologists already share many of the same principles of quality work. Foremost is a keen sense of observation and documentation of the descriptive details of lived experience. Thick description—from participants' hairstyles to the sound of cicadas or bulldozers—enables both creative writers and anthropologists to draw meaning from the ordinary texture of human experience. However, while ethnographers are likely to record descriptive data during fieldwork, there are a number of reasons they are less likely to draw on creative writing techniques during data analysis and presentation.

Understandably, anthropologists may perceive the need to safeguard the field's position in the sciences through claims to objective, scientific truth. Positioning oneself as a creative writer in anthropology puts one's work at risk of being labeled subjective, impressionistic, emotional and, consequently, invalid. It might also jeopardize access to funding, collegial respect and tenure. However, if we consider that all claims to scientific truth are suspect, influenced by the culturally bound nature of the researcher's text, we can free ourselves to write in ways that name and claim feeling, story and relationship.

Postmodern approaches to anthropology render all ethnographic accounts as partial and subjective. Researchers can never know all there is to know about their participants. Additionally, the researcher is always present, implicitly or explicitly, in any ethnographic text. We argue that with the advent of postmodernism, the project of anthropology has changed from one that only seeks to authentically represent the other to one that acknowledges the ethnographers' own perceptions of their cross-cultural travels.

Despite plentiful deterrents, we believe alternative genres for anthropological work are a vital part of generating new knowledge. Accompanying a call for alternatives must also be a call for critical discussions of what can be gained from an Arts-Based Research (ABR) stance to anthropology. While ABR also includes the visual, musical and

dramatic arts, here we examine what it means to use the literary arts to take an interpretive stance, one that enables the researcher to gain unexpected insight about others as well as about oneself.

Bridging the Divide

Creative writing approaches to anthropology pay attention to what is considered valid and valuable in scholarly communities that are both literary and scientific. A creative writer is encouraged to "show don't tell" (let the details speak for themselves) whereas an ethnographer is encouraged to "show and tell" (show the details and tell the reader what they mean). Creative approaches to ethnographic texts represent a hybrid form, relying on fictional and poetic representations of data that embrace detail and assertion but engage the reader as the ultimate interpretive authority. Creative approaches recognize multiple—and at times—contradictory interpretations of cultural meaning, and offer a definition of social science at the center of a literary-scientific divide. Fact/fiction, self/other, reason/emotion—ABR attempts to bridge these and other dichotomies that have thus far prevented healthy mergers between the social sciences, humanities and the arts. Likewise, the literary arts offer a means to come to know points of view outside the limitations of our own Western, dichotomous constructions.

New forms create opportunities for new content and new ways of sharing what we come to know. Formal qualities of creative writing applied to the inquiry process can be a means to open doors to the unexpected. For example, crafting first-person vignettes in the voice of a participant or a composite voice of many participants enables the researcher to engage the other's perspective and gain new insight to the human condition. An exemplary project is *Opportunity House: Ethnographic Stories of Mental Retardation* (1998) by applied anthropologist Michael Angrosino, who created composite characters from data collected at a home for intellectually disabled men. He used fictional short stories to present multiple points of view of a population traditionally gone unheard.

Another move that opens the door to empirical discovery is in connecting the anthropologist's cultural observations of others and the researcher's own subjective and emotional world during fieldwork. Cultural anthropologist Adrie Kusserow makes these connections in her recent book of poems *Hunting Down the Monk* (2002), weaving stories about others with stories about herself during and beyond fieldwork in Nepal and Northern India. Through the literary techniques of repetition, telling detail and compact, imagistic verse, Kusserow conveys a portrait of her fieldwork that would prove elusive in traditional ethnographic prose.

Embracing techniques in creative writing can make our discoveries more accessible and meaningful to readers—including readers who are participants in our studies—stimulating dialogue and cross-cultural understanding. Often times

the readership we most wish to impact is excluded from our work because the genres we tend to write in are too long, too jargon-laden and too removed from the lived realities of our participants. In contrast, by writing ethnographies that are engaging, we may enhance the visibility and impact of our projects, and, with hope, increase our influence on those who lead social change.

Developing the Poet Within

However, there is also concern about the quality of this work. How can anthropologists untrained in the literary arts engage in poetry or fiction? Is it possible to be well-trained and qualified in the arts and in anthropology? Where does ABR fit within the Institutional Review Board process? These and many other questions about the quality, validity and import of ABR are undergoing discussion in a large number of venues. Currently, the Society for Humanistic Anthropology enjoins discussions of quality by awarding annual prizes for the best ethnographic poetry and fiction, as well as the Victor Turner prize for best-written ethnography. The 2005 Qualitative Research conference QUIG (www.coe.uga.edu/quig) will address the theme "Art as Research and Research as Art." Finally, a number of journals and publications explore this area, including the "Ethnographic Alternative Book Series" by Altamira Press. All of these forums are beginning to take the import of ABR as a given and explore unanswered questions.

Perhaps the most important aspect of including an ABR perspective is to reshape graduate education in the social sciences to be more inclusive and supportive of training in the literary, visual and performing arts. While new anthropologists receive foundations in theories and methodologies of the field, they also could benefit from introductions to the arts. Specifically, a focus on elements of creative writing will enable future anthropologists to analyze data and craft findings in ways that are insightful, accessible and engaging to diverse audiences.

Arts-based approaches are not an either-or proposition to traditional research paradigms. We do no service to ourselves as arts-based researchers to define ourselves in opposition to traditional practices. Rather, the literary arts offer ways to stretch our capacities for creativity and knowledge. The free associative nature of creative writing offers an alternative to purely linear ways of thinking and writing about culture, one that explores the unsayable: the tacit knowledge our subjects sense but can't necessarily articulate and the researchers' role in the cultural construction of knowledge. In this way we write an anthropology that is more valid, valued and visible. ■

Melisa Cahnmann is an assistant professor of language education at the University of Georgia. Her poems are published widely in APR, Quarterly West and other national literary magazines. For further reference on ABR see Cahnmann (2003) "The Craft, Practice, and Possibility of Poetry in Educational Research" in Educational Researcher. Teri Holbrook has published four novels and is a graduate student in the UGA Language Education Department.