



ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

WRITING CULTURE

What is the current state of anthropological writing? How can it be improved, and what can be done to make it accessible to a broader audience? At the "Writing Culture Planning Seminar" held in October 2004 at the School of American Research (SAR) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, attendees sought answers to these questions. This is the third of a series of articles on the topic by seminar participants.

Dancing a Jig with Genre

ALMA GOTTLIEB
U ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Dieting books—advice columns—car repair manuals—greeting cards—package warning labels . . . the literate world is inundated by dozens of different genres of writing. As participants in this riot of literacy, scholars are hardly unacquainted with the dazzling array of texts of every shape, size and sort. And yet, at least



Alma Gottlieb

when it comes time to write our own texts, we often appear to be peculiarly oblivious to this literary plenitude. Instead of partaking of these riches, most of us relentlessly limit ourselves to a single genre: the scholarly article (or its book-length equivalent). Why do most scholars-who-write restrict themselves to this one kind of writing when there is a huge selection of options to choose from?

Scholars as Authors

With a long and respectable history, academic writing is characterized by boundaries, rules and expectations that are socialized early into developing scholars and shared fully by most trained

practitioners. As with most scholars who write, I've built much of my career working through this distinctive writing style. And as with most scholars who teach, I've worked hard to train my students to master both its fundamentals and nuances.

Yet, as cultural anthropology constantly reminds us, many human structures are surprisingly fragile, somewhat arbitrary affairs. In my own case, the more scholarly texts I've both read and produced, and the more I've considered the intellectual pleasures and insights offered by other genres, the more restless an author I've become.

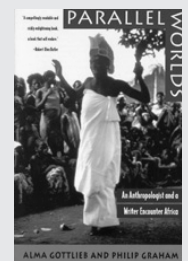
Yes, I use the word "author"—but in recent years, the author-identity of scholars has been increasingly scrutinized. Clifford Geertz has reminded us to consider "works and lives," and the "writing culture" group and their generation of followers have urged our discipline to question the authority of the text. This important rethinking forms part of broader critical trends resulting from the "interpretive turn" that has swept through much of the academy over the past three decades. Many scholars now question the theoretical divide that appears to fully separate the conventionally defined disciplines of the humanities, arts, social sciences and natural sciences; the seemingly unique and unquestionable authority

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Venturing Beyond Scholarly Writing

A selection of texts by scholars who have ventured beyond the conventional scholarly journal article or monograph:

- Allen, Catherine J and Nathan Garner, *Condor Qatay: Anthropology in Performance* (1997). ► ethnographically-grounded play set in the Andes
- Anthropology and Humanism* ► biannual, peer-reviewed journal published by the Society for Humanistic Anthropology encouraging writing in all genres
- Bateson, Gregory, "Metalogues," in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972). ► partly fictionalized conversations about wide-ranging topics between Gregory Bateson and his partly imagined daughter as a young child, anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson
- Behar, Ruth, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (1996). ► autobiographical essays on a variety of life and disciplinary topics
- Berger, Arthur Asa, *Postmortem for a Postmodernist* (1997). ► exposition of postmodernism in the form of a murder mystery
- DeLoache, Judy S and Alma Gottlieb (eds), *A World of Babies: Imagined Childcare Guides for Seven Societies* (2000). ► fictively authored child-rearing "manuals" based on ethnographic data concerning child-rearing
- Geertz, Clifford, *Works and Lives* (1988). ► discussion of the literary styles of Benedict, Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss, and others
- Gottlieb, Alma and Philip Graham, *Parallel Worlds: An Anthropologist and a Writer Encounter Africa* (1994). ► chapter sections written alternately by each author in first-person-singular narratives
- Hosler, Jim, *Clan Apis* (2000). ► somewhat fanciful but scientifically-informed biography of a honeybee named Nyuki told in the form of a comic strip, or graphic novel, written by an entomologist
- Hosler, Jim, *The Sandwalk Adventures: An Adventure in Evolution Told in Five Chapters* (2003). ► with Charles Darwin as a main character, this graphic novel tells the story of evolution in a very user-friendly way
- Hurston, Zora Neale, *Mules and Men* (1990). ► folklore/memoir of rural African-American lives in early 20th century
- Narayan, Kirin, *Love, Stars, and All that* (1994). ► ethnographically-grounded novel of an Indian graduate student at UC-Berkeley
- Ottaviani, Jim, *Two-Fisted Science: Stories about Scientists* (2001). ► major scientists' lives and achievements told in the form of comic strips by a biologist, who calls the genre, "fictionalized science"
- Price, Richard and Sally Price, *Enigma Variations: A Novel* (1995). ► ethnographically-grounded novel of anthropologists encountering Saramaka art/forgery/smuggling
- Richardson, Laurel and Ernest Lockridge, *Travels with Ernest: Crossing the Literary/Sociological Divide* (2004). ► narratives and conversations by this married sociologist/writer couple about their world travels
- Saldaña, Johnny, ed, *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre* (2005). ► collection of seven ethnographically-grounded plays
- Stoller, Paul, *Jaguar: A Story of Africans in America* (1999). ► ethnographically-grounded novel of the new West African diaspora in the US
- Stoller, Paul, *Stranger in the Village of the Sick: A Memoir of Cancer, Sorcery and Healing* (2004). ► first-person account of how earlier fieldwork in Niger helped the author cope with cancer
- Taylor, Julie, *Paper Tangos* (1998). ► first-person account of Argentinian tango practice with small photos set along the margins in "flip book" fashion
- Wolf, Marjorie, *A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility* (1992). ► retelling of a single ethnographic incident in three different ways



Genre

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of the scholar/author; and the invisibility of the reader. Yet most of us in the academy ignore many important implications that ought to flow from the fact that scholars are also authors.

Teaching Ethnographic Writing

Still, in recent years, some have started teaching their literary restlessness. The Society for Humanistic Anthropology offers workshops at the annual AAA conference on writing ethnographic fiction, poetry and other “alternative” genres, and these workshops are regularly over-subscribed. Likewise, submissions to the ethnographic poetry and ethnographic fiction contests sponsored by that society have increased dramatically in recent years. Elsewhere, an intensive week-long workshop in ethnographic writing held every summer at Lewis and Clark College draws many refugees from an intellectual space that to them sometimes feels like a textual prison.

Inspired by this growing interest, this year I introduced a course on “Writing Ethnography” into my department’s curriculum. In the course, we focus on the ways in which scholars-as-authors may have unexpected license to cross the seemingly unbroachable genre divides. Exploring current debates via a selection of anthropological texts that boldly experiment with writing ethnography, students are exposed to a range of writing genres practiced by anthropologists, from Edward Sapir (a poet-linguist) and Zora Neale Hurston (an anthropologist-folklorist-novelist) to many contemporary scholars likewise pushing the bounds of academic writing (see sidebar). Complementing our reading of experimental texts by respected scholars, students try their hand at such experimentation by writing a set of interpretive texts in three different genres about a society.

Such courses on ethnographic writing are sprouting up in anthropology programs nationally. Still, the increasingly loud clamor for alternative writing remains marginal, a liminal moment, and few among us have found ourselves inspired to venture beyond the strict contours of the scholarly article or book in our own writing. For example, the course I am currently teaching has a healthy enrollment of adventurous undergraduate anthropology majors and graduate students across several disciplines—but no graduate students in cultural anthropology. At another university, an ethnographic writing course is likewise typically populated by students from departments other than anthropology. A colleague at a third university told me a parallel story: on hearing about a similar course this semester, several graduate students confessed that although they would like to take the course, they were reluctant because they feared it would not help them with their qualifying exams.

Isn’t there something wrong with our curricula when we implicitly shape our graduate programs to devalue writing and discourage students from taking it seriously, even though it is something that many of them will have to do regularly—and well—to succeed in their careers?

Engaging a Broader Public

In recent years, the AAA has issued a call for anthropologists to take bold steps outside the academy and endeavor to share our expertise with a broad reading public, particularly by establishing a policy and education committee, and proving media training. Beyond the AAA, efforts at engaging a broader public in anthropology proliferate. New emphases in public anthropology at several major doctoral programs such as the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Oregon and elsewhere, and a radio program, “The Human Experience: Perspectives in Anthropology,” produced by anthropologist Robert Leonard (University of New Mexico) and aired on many National Public Radio stations, are just two additional efforts underway to dramatically expand anthropology’s reach.


Writing must be at the heart of all these exciting initiatives to considerably enlarge the audience for anthropology. Who among us hasn’t experienced the frustration of a friend or acquaintance expressing excitement at the thought of our professional work, only to confess boredom on trying to read any of our actual publications? No matter how compelling our topic, a

jargon-laden text of overstuffed prose and endless caveats and footnotes is a sure way to constrict our readership to the single digits. By contrast, an accessible and enjoyable text will easily draw new readers to our research and our insights.

Don’t get me wrong—I’m not advocating shutting down scholarly publishing. A firm place remains for the traditional scholarly article and monograph. But if we have any ambitions to write for someone other than each other—that is, for thoughtful readers beyond colleagues with doctorates in our subfield—the possibilities of alternative genres await.

Inventing a genre he called “Metalogues,” Gregory Bateson wrote partly fictionalized conversations about the most arcane of topics, held with his partly imagined daughter, who grew up to become anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson; other anthropologists have written up their ethnography in the form of plays, novels, imagined childcare guides and using “flip book” techniques. Acknowledging the small but growing corpus of alternative writings, I invite you to find your own jig to dance with genre. ☐

Alma Gottlieb is a professor of anthropology, women’s studies and African studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She has written professional texts in several genres (scholarly article and monograph, co-authored memoir, fictively authored childrearing “manual,” op-ed piece, letter to the editor) and is eager to try her hand at more.

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