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Forum: Writing about Children



Writing about Children for a Public Forum

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Abstract

Anthropologists researching children's lives have incredible stories to tell. How might we best tell them in readable ways that will appeal to "ordinary readers" beyond our colleagues and students? In this article, I explore the possibilities of "alternative" ways to write ethnography in general, and the ethnography of children in particular. Given children's nature, I argue that creative approaches to writing children's lives are especially appropriate and powerful. In the first section, I consider a variety of adventurous ethnographic writing on assorted topics; in the second section, I discuss some creative approaches to ethnographic writing focused, specifically, on children.

Keywords

public anthropology – public intellectual – engaged anthropology – ethnographic writing – anthropology of childhood – children

1 Opening Thoughts

In the early days of American anthropology, Margaret Mead captured the hearts and minds of hundreds of thousands of readers – not only across the U.S. but around the world. In 1928, a revised version of her beautifully written

dissertation, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, retold what many thought a single human story – now recast in culturally variable terms.¹ The *stürm und drang* (“storm and stress”) of adolescence is not universal, Mead argued. Rather, in Samoa, Mead claimed, teenagers had a much easier time, supported by a relaxed approach from their families. Due, no doubt, to a combination of a universal theme, a culturally intriguing locale, and unusually engaging writing, the book soon became a best-seller. Later, many of Mead’s other books gained remarkably broad attention. For some years in the 1970s, Mead even wrote a monthly column for the magazine, *Redbook*, sold on newsstands and in supermarkets across the U.S. In 2018, while I was teaching at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou (China), quite a few anthropology students told me that they had read some of Mead’s work in Chinese translation. As anthropologist Paul Shankman has said, “Mead was more than a public intellectual; she was an icon. . . She was also an oracle, somebody that people turned to for opinions on everything from marijuana to nuclear war, sex to civil rights.”²

As it happened, an inverse relationship developed between Mead’s public prominence and her disciplinary status. The more ordinary readers embraced the writings of Margaret Mead, and the more she, herself, became a public figure, the more her colleagues lost respect for her scholarship. In 1983, Australian anthropologist, Derek Freeman published a book that aimed entirely to discredit Margaret Mead’s research in Samoa.³ Speaking approvingly of the book, fellow Australian anthropologist, Richard Basham commented: “A lot of us had already discounted the scientific work of Dr. Mead.”⁴

In these disdainful remarks, I suspect Mead reminded many scholars of journalists – for whose work they equally felt little affection. In fact, anthropology and journalism have long had a love-hate relationship. Anthropologists have often dismissed journalists for approaching too few interviewees, with whom they spend too little time, and about whose lives they have too little to say concerning the depths and complexities of lived experiences beyond short-interview-based remarks. And what journalists do have to say is often, anthropologists think, “dumbed-down” – pabulum suited for the masses — who,

1 Mead, M. (1928). *Coming of Age in Samoa*. William Morrow.

2 Quoted in Evans, C. (2017). “Both Sides Misunderstand Margaret Mead, Prof Contends—Late Anthropologist’s *Redbook* Columns Undercut Both Conservative and Liberal Stereotypes, Expert Finds.” *Colorado Arts and Sciences Magazine*, December 1. Also see: Shankman, P. (2009). *The Trashing of Margaret Mead: Anatomy of an Anthropological Controversy*. University of Wisconsin Press.

3 Freeman, D. (1986). *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*. Harvard University Press. See also Freeman, D. (1999). *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead: A Historical Analysis of Her Samoan Research*. Basic Books.

4 Quoted in: Wilford, J.N. (1983). “Earlier Criticisms Surface in Reactions to Book on Dr. Mead.” *New York Times*, February 1.

scholars in turn frequently assume, lack both curiosity about difference, and patience for nuance.

But this critique is a two-way street. For their part, journalists often mock anthropologists for spending too much time with our interviewees – and for engaging in inappropriately informal activities with them, beyond structured interviewing. As we know, the sort of “deep hanging out” that is the hallmark of the ethnographic method can range from chopping onions in kitchens with women, or drinking in bars with men, to joining in shopping expeditions, wedding celebrations, trials, and funerals.⁵ After a year or more of such “deep living” in a community, anthropologists might produce an article or two on a narrowly technical topic, laced with impenetrable jargon, and suited for a scholarly journal with a readership of, maybe, a dozen specialists. The hard-working journalist who cranks out articles every week on tight deadlines for thousands of readers can’t help but view this meagre output – and equally meagre readership – as, well, pathetic. Fortunately, the relationship between our two “disciplines” is not all mutually disdainful. Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz was so intrigued by the work of “foreign correspondents” that he decided to study the quaint ways of this sub-tribe of journalists. The result: a provocative book that explored as many similarities as differences between our two professions.⁶ In some ways, that book foreshadowed a new respect by anthropologists for the work that foreign correspondents do – along with the writings of investigative reporters, feature writers, and “long-form” journalists.

Indeed, since that book appeared 15 years ago, more work produced by anthropologists and (certain) journalists has converged in striking ways. I sometimes find myself reading fantastically compelling journalistic writing that has the depth of good ethnography — but that, I must grudgingly acknowledge, is far better written. From an earlier generation, the brilliant work of Ryszard Kapuściński in Iran, Ethiopia, and elsewhere comes to mind;⁷ for the current generation, I find the work of Leslie Chang on young, female factory workers in China, for example, equally riveting.⁸ As Borofsky and Schneider have written in soliciting well-written book manuscripts in anthropology, “One of the present ironies of the field is that the most appreciated and best selling

5 Gottlieb, A. (2006). “Ethnography: Theory and Methods.” In: E. Perelman and S. Curran, eds. *A Handbook for Social Science Field Research; Essays & Bibliographic Sources on Research Design and Methods*. Sage.

6 Hannerz, U. (2004). *Foreign News: Exploring the World of Foreign Correspondents*. University of Chicago Press.

7 Kapuściński, R. (1983 [1978]). *The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; Kapuściński, R. (1985 [1982]). *Shah of Shahs*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

8 Chang, L. 2009. *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*. Random House.

anthropologically-oriented books today are written by authors with little or no formal anthropological training.”⁹

Thankfully, decreasing numbers of anthropologists nowadays embrace the old working principle that scholarly texts must be written in obscure language — the more syllables, foreign-language phrases, and neologisms, the better. Instead, many anthropologists increasingly feel frustrated by the minuscule size of their fan clubs and are seeking paths to a broader audience. Among the methods they are experimenting with is a writing style closer to that in which the best journalists excel.

In the U.S., the American Anthropological Association has created several initiatives to achieve this goal, including working with teachers and adult students, and encouraging anthropologists to participate in public policy debates.¹⁰ Elsewhere, many European, Latin American, and Asian scholars have long engaged more comfortably with broader publics than have scholars in the U.S.¹¹

9 Borofsky, R. and Schneider, N. (n.d.). Series Overview, Center for Public Anthropology, <https://www.publicanthropology.org/books-book-series/california-book-series/series-overview/>.

10 For example, see American Anthropological Association (n.d.). AAA Government Relations and Public Policy Efforts, <http://www.aaanet.org/gvt/index.htm>; American Anthropological Association (n.d.). American Anthropologist Launches “Public Anthropology Reviews” – Request for Submission of Review Materials, <http://www.aaanet.org/publications/ameranthro.cfm>; American Anthropological Association (n.d.). Committee on Public Policy, <http://www.aaanet.org/cmtes/ppc/index.cfm>; American Anthropological Association (n.d.). Committee on Practicing, Applied and Public Interest Anthropology, <http://www.aaanet.org/cmtes/copapia/>.

11 E.g. Afonso, A.I. (2006). “Practicing Anthropology in Portugal.” *North American Practicing Anthropologists Bulletin* 25(1): 156–75; American Anthropological Association (n.d.) Committee on World Anthropologies, <http://www.aaanet.org/cmtes/cwa/>; Barth, F. (2001). “Envisioning a More Public Anthropology: An Interview with Fredrik Barth” [with Robert Borofsky], Center for a Public Anthropology, April 18, <http://www.publicanthropology.org/interview-with-fredrik-barth/>; Eriksen, T.H. (2005). *Engaging Anthropology: The Case for a Public Presence*. Berg; Hastrup, K., et al. (2011). *Social and Cultural Anthropological Research in Norway—An Evaluation*. Oslo: Research Council of Norway; Hong Kong Anthropological Society (n.d.). http://www.wcaanet.org/members/members_descr.shtml; Howell, S.L. (2010). “Norwegian Academic Anthropologists in Public Spaces.” *Current Anthropology* 51(2): S269–278; Ribeiro, G.L. (2004). “Practicing Anthropology in Brazil: A Retrospective Look at Two Time Periods.” *Practicing Anthropology* 26(3): 6–10; Ribeiro, G.L. (2012). “From Local to Global Ethnographic Scenarios.” In: A. Gottlieb, ed., *The Restless Anthropologist: New Fieldsites, New Visions*. University of Chicago Press; Rogers, S.C. (2001). “Anthropology in France.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 3: 481–504; Uquillas, J. E. and Larreamendy, P. (2006). “Applied Anthropology in Ecuador: Development, Practice, and Discourse.” *NAPA Bulletin* 25(1): 14–34.

Internationally, then, many of us no longer consider it a badge of honor when a friend or relative expresses excitement upon hearing about our research, only to confess confusion after dipping into our scholarly publications that they find “boring, and . . . virtually unreadable.”¹² Moreover, fewer academic publishers are willing to publish such works. To sell more books, one prominent editor of an academic publisher once told me that he advises all potential authors: “More stories, less theory.”

It should be no surprise that good writing sells – and that means, in one way or another, good stories. Our species has aptly been dubbed *homo narrans* – “narrating humans.”¹³ Many thoughtful observers of the human condition point out that storytelling is central both to our survival and to our nature.¹⁴ Related to this point, psychologists remind us that we humans live our lives at least as much in our feelings as we do in our thoughts.¹⁵ How might anthropologists write with these insights in mind to compellingly narrate the human story, complete with emotional experience?

2 Writing with Readers in Mind

Many years ago, when I was returning from fifteen months of fieldwork in small villages in the rain forest of Côte d’Ivoire, one of my professors offered me some advice that shocked me at the time. “Don’t look at your fieldnotes,” Ed Winter urged. “Just write what you remember. You’ll remember the good stuff. The important stuff. You can always check your notes later, to make sure you got the details right.”

When I was writing my dissertation, I judged that advice impractical and ignored it. Unsurprisingly, my dissertation turned out feeling rather sterile. Soon after I finished it, my writer-husband, Philip Graham, and I decided to

12 MacClancy, J. (1996). “Fieldwork Styles: Bohannon, Barley, and Gardner.” In: J. MacClancy and C. McDonough, eds. *Popularizing Anthropology*. Routledge.

13 Niles, J. (1999). *The Poetics and Anthropology of Oral Literature*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

14 E.g., Coles, R. (1989). *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*. Houghton Mifflin; Eckstein, B. and Throgmorton, J.A. eds. (2003). *Story and Sustainability: Planning, Practice, and Possibility for American Cities*. M.I.T. Press; Fisher, W.R. (1987). *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*. University of South Carolina Press; Gabriel, Y. (2000). *Storytelling in Organizations: Facts, Fictions, and Fantasies*. Oxford University Press; Gottschall, J. (2012). *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

15 E.g., LeDoux, J. (1998). *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life*. Simon & Schuster.

embark on a joint writing project in a very different key – a memoir of the time we had spent living in two small villages in Côte d’Ivoire. At the time, I found few models among social scientists for this sort of writing.¹⁶ Instead, my coauthor-spouse taught me some basics of strong narrative — writing a realistic dialogue, sketching a compelling character, setting an inviting scene. To complement his lessons, I stopped reading all anthropology for a full year and only read compellingly written non-fiction articles in *The New Yorker*.

Since publishing our book in 1993,¹⁷ many more fieldwork memoirs have been published. Of the 93 books currently listed as winners or honorable mentions for the annual Victor Turner Award for Ethnographic Writing, most put the author actively in the story.¹⁸

Moreover, several book series published by university presses now aim to attract anthropologists to write books intended for broad readerships beyond scholars. For instance, the prominent “Public Anthropology” series published by the University of California Press has 23 books in print to date. The hallmark of that series is that it: “draws professional scholars from a wide range of disciplines to address major public issues in ways that help non-academic audiences to understand and address them.”¹⁹

Another book series in “Contemporary Ethnography” published by the University of Pennsylvania Press (co-edited by Kirin Narayan and myself) also has writing style as its hallmark — specifically, featuring narrative-based ethnography. To date, 48 engagingly written books have appeared in that series.²⁰ The combination of books in this new corpus of ethnographies that scholars have written for ordinary readers, while being published by university presses,

16 Important exceptions included: Briggs, J. (1970). *Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Cesara, M. (1982). *Reflections of a Woman Anthropologist: No Hiding Place*. New York: Academic Press; Dumont, J.-P. (1978). *The Headman and I: Ambiguity and Ambivalence in the Fieldworking Experience*. Austin: University of Texas Press; Stoller, P. and Olkes, C. (1987). *In Sorcery’s Shadow: A Memoir of Apprenticeship among the Songhay of Niger*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Tedlock, B. (1981). *The Beautiful and the Dangerous: Encounters with the Zuni Indians*. New York: Viking Press.

17 Gottlieb, A. and Graham, P. (1993). *Parallel Worlds: An Anthropologist and a Writer Encounter Africa*. Crown.

18 Society of Humanistic Anthropology (n.d.). <http://www.aaanet.org/sections/sha/sha-prize-winners/>.

19 Center for a Public Anthropology (n.d.). <https://www.publicanthropology.org/books-book-series/california-book-series/series-overview/>.

20 Contemporary Ethnography (n.d.). University of Pennsylvania Press, <https://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/series/CE.html>.

suggests that many among the current generation of scholars seem inclined to “write from the heart” as much as from the mind.²¹

3 New Genres

To find new readers, anthropologists are also staking out new territory by dipping into other genres, in a dual quest to re-invigorate traditional readerships and attract new ones. Contemporary anthropologists are especially rediscovering that well-written editorial (“op ed”) pieces, letters to the editor, magazine articles, podcasts, and radio pieces offer further tools to draw readers to our work.²² American anthropologist, Tanya Luhrmann, for example, now writes a regular column (typically, monthly or bi-monthly) in the *New York Times* on issues relevant to her expertise in religion and psychiatry.²³

Luhrmann is not alone. In the U.S., a new Public Voices Fellowship Program (organized by a scholar creating a collective venture she termed the OpEd Project) now offers year-long training in this critical genre to scholars, especially inviting women and scholars of color to share their scholarship and their perspectives in user-friendly ways with broad audiences. The project has clearly had much success, as they have now expanded to offer short seminars around the U.S., as well as individual mentoring and editing services. These latter programs come with a rather hefty price tag – but some scholars must be paying these prices, suggesting the high level of motivation among scholars eager to reach a wider audience.²⁴

21 Aronie, N. S. (1998). *Writing from the Heart: Tapping the Power of Your Inner Voice*. Hyperion.

22 One podcast series running strong is This Anthro Life Podcast, “an experimental narrative podcast that takes a unique cross cultural and time spanning perspective on what makes us human.” The producers collaborate with the American Anthropological Association, Wenner-Gren Foundation, Smithsonian Institution, and other powerhouses of anthropological production. As of this writing, the team has produce more than 100 episodes. See <https://www.thisanthrolife.com/about/>.

23 Luhrmann, T. (n.d). *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/column/t-m-luhrmann>.

24 For one example of a scholar’s positive experience with this project, see Colón-Ramos, D. (2013). “Found in Translation: A Professor Searches for a Public Voice.” *Chronicle of Higher Education* April 22, http://chronicle.com/article/Found-in-Translation-A/138651/?cid=at&utm_source=at&utm_medium=en. For the project’s website, see The OpEd Project (n.d.). <http://www.theopedproject.org/>.

The classic genres of literature also offer appealing avenues for sharing our expertise. Early anthropologists such as Edward Sapir²⁵ and Ruth Benedict²⁶ published poetry that gained them many readers beyond their scholarly colleagues. In recent years, cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo has won the widely respected American Book Award for a volume of ethnographic poetry.²⁷ Nowadays, many more anthropologists submit work to the Society for Humanistic Anthropology, which offers annual awards in ethnographic poetry, with winning poems published in its peer-reviewed journal, *Anthropology and Humanism*.

Likewise, the early ethnographic novels of Adolf Bandalier, Ella Deloria, Zora Neale Hurston, and Laura Bohannon have many contemporary counterparts in novels by anthropologists Tobias Hecht,²⁸ Kirin Narayan,²⁹ Paul Stoller,³⁰ and others. The Society for Humanistic Anthropology also offers annual awards in ethnographic short fiction—again, with winning pieces published in its peer-reviewed journal, *Anthropology and Humanism*.

Sometimes, switching up genres becomes the most effective way to tell an ethnographic story. Some anthropologists have juxtaposed their social science writing with the fictional writing of authors (past or present) in their field communities;³¹ others have juxtaposed their social science writing with their own fictional writing;³² and still others have teamed up to co-author social science-based texts with fiction writers who are better trained at telling stories.³³

For those who are intrigued by the prospect of incorporating literary techniques into their scholarly texts, workshops on writing ethnographic fiction, poetry, and other “alternative” genres are typically offered annually at the annual American Anthropological Association conference (sponsored by

25 Flores, T. (1986). “The Poetry of Edward Sapir.” *Dialectical Anthropology* 11: 157–68; Handler, R. (1986). “Vigorous Male and Aspiring Female: Poetry, Personality, and Culture in Edward Sapir and Ruth Benedict.” In: G. Stocking, ed. *Malinowski, Rivers Benedict and Others: Essays on Culture and Personality*. University of Wisconsin Press.

26 Handler, R. (1986). “Vigorous Male;” Caffrey, M.M. (1989). *Ruth Benedict: Stranger in this Land*. University of Texas Press.

27 Rosaldo, R. (2003). *Prayer to Spider Woman*. Instituto Coahuilense de Cultura.

28 Hecht, T. (2006). *After Life: An Ethnographic Novel*. Duke University Press.

29 Narayan, K. (1994). *Love, Stars and All that*. Simon and Schuster.

30 Stoller, P. (1999). *Jaguar: A Story of Africans in America*. University of Chicago Press.

31 Plath, D. (1980). *Long Engagements: Maturity in Modern Japan*. Stanford University Press.

32 Ghodsee, K. (2011). *Lost in Transition: Ethnographies of Everyday Life after Communism*. Duke University Press.

33 Block, E. and McGrath, W. (2019). *Infected Kin: Orphan Care and AIDS in Lesotho*. Rutgers University Press; Gottlieb, A. and Graham, P. (1993). *Parallel Worlds*; Gottlieb, A. and Graham, P. (2012). *Braided Worlds*. University of Chicago Press.

the Society for Humanistic Anthropology), and they are increasingly over-subscribed. Moreover, semester-length courses on ethnographic writing are increasingly sprouting up in top-rated undergraduate as well as graduate programs in anthropology across the U.S. and, more recently, in Europe and China. As such courses proliferate, programs train new generations of anthropology students to take the craft of writing seriously.

Beyond the classic literary genres of poetry and fiction, anthropologists have begun sharing their expertise through other creative writing genres as well. Some have written ethnography in the form of plays,³⁴ mysteries,³⁵ and biographies.³⁶ Others venture beyond even the “new” (literary) genres to create their own. Consider, for example, the case of *Paper Tangos*, an ethnography of Argentinian tango dancing by U.S.-born dancer-turned-anthropologist, Julie Taylor. How to convey on a static page the dynamic involved in a dance form that, by definition, is all about movement? Taylor presents her reader with a way to add movement to the flat sheets by designing her text to be produced in a modified form of a children’s style “flip book.”³⁷ As Melissa Fitch Lockhart explains, Taylor has selected a set of

postage-size photographs of scenes taken from Fernando Solanas’s film *El Exilio de Gardel* (1986) that are located on the right margin of each page. When the pages are flipped through rapidly the images come to life. In the first of four [sets of images] that encompass the book, a couple dances amid shadows as others look on. The next scene shows letters flung from the top of a staircase, those written by Argentines in exile during the country’s last dictatorship. These are the “paper tangos” mentioned in Solanas’s film. The third shows a man grasping a woman violently and pulling her towards him to kiss her violently. In the final

34 Allen, C. and Garner, N.C. (1997). *Condor Qatay: Anthropology in Performance*. Waveland Press; Saldaña, J. ed. (2005). *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre*. AltaMira Press.

35 Nanda, S. (2009) *The Gift of a Bride: A Tale of Anthropology, Matrimony and Murder*. AltaMira Press; Price, R. and Price, S. (1995). *Enigma Variations*. Harvard University Press.

36 Behar, R. (1993). *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza’s Story*. Beacon Press; Brown, K.M. (1991). *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. University of California Press; Chernoff, J. (2003). *Hustling Is Not Stealing: Stories of an African Bar Girl*. University of Chicago Press; Chernoff, J. (2005). *Exchange Is Not Robbery: More Stories of an African Bar Girl*. University of Chicago Press; Crapanzano, V. (1980). *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan*. University of Chicago Press; Shostak, M. (1981). *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*. Harvard University Press.

37 Taylor, J. (1998). *Paper Tangos*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

scene, a couple dances and their movements continue on the book's final pages after the words of the printed text have ended.³⁸

The marginal presence of these tiny images accomplishes several effects at once on the reader. As we rapidly flip the pages, we acknowledge the tactile nature of turning the page; in turn, that act may unconsciously evoke the tactile nature of tango dancing, even approaching a kind of dance of the pages themselves. At the same time, rapidly flicking across large numbers of pages has the effect of violating a taboo for a dedicated adult reader – used to luxuriating, as we are, in the words printed on a page. Does this unconscious violation of the text unconsciously evoke the violence at the heart of some tango dances, as Tylor explores in her text? And, of course, as we flick the pages, assuming that we gaze at those small images along the edges, we get a hint of the rapid movements of tango dancers, themselves. In these ways, Taylor has brilliantly mobilized a multi-sensory approach to a topic that is, itself, multi-sensory.

4 New Spaces

If old-fashioned, bound books offer creative experiences such as “flip pages,” the Internet now offers unprecedented access to expanding readerships. Our discipline came late to the blogosphere, but colleagues have by now discovered the potential of the Web. Influential scholars such as Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Eriksen,³⁹ American anthropologist Paul Stoller,⁴⁰ and others now write guest posts for their own or other websites such as the *Huffington Post*, which have enormous reach. Spearheaded by the relatively early collective blog (which debuted in 2005), *Savage Minds* — recently renamed *anthro{dendum}* (in late 2017) and briefly, as an April Fool's Day joke, *anthro{duodenum}*⁴¹ – increasing numbers of anthropologists are blogging.⁴²

38 Lockhart, M. F. (1998). [Review of *Paper Tangos* by Julia Taylor]. *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 2, pp. 271–72.

39 Eriksen, T. H. (n.d.) Engaging with the World: Eriksen's Site, <http://folk.uio.no/geirthe/>.

40 Stoller, P. (n.d.) *The Huffington Post*, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-stoller/>.

41 The original site (whose content is now publicly archived) is here: <https://savageminds.org>. The successor site is here: <https://anthrodendum.org>. The April Fool's Day post is here: <https://anthrodendum.org/2018/04/01/anthrodendum-is-now-anthroduodenum/>.

42 For a long (and growing) list of anthropology blogs that has been updated annually since 2012, see Antrosio, J. (n.d.). Living Anthropologically: Anthropology – Understanding – Possibility, <https://www.livinganthropologically.com/anthropology-blogs-2018/>.

Beyond individual blog posts, the Web offers unlimited opportunities for creative communication with readers — opportunities that would have been unimaginable to earlier generations. For example, anthropologist Alex Golub recently urged his colleagues to regularly edit Wikipedia entries and write book reviews on Amazon.⁴³ Given the unprecedented global reach of these two blockbuster sites in particular, it is hard to imagine spaces with more potential impact.

YouTube offers another exceptional opportunity. Anthropologist Michael Wesch, for example, has produced inspiring YouTube lectures and documentary shorts. His YouTube channel has over 21,000 “followers” who subscribe to his channel,⁴⁴ and according to Keith Hart, Wesch’s videos have been seen by millions of viewers around the world.⁴⁵ Plenty of other anthropologists have discovered the appeal of YouTube for exposing anthropology to people who might not have found much appealing in the discipline. For example, a folk song (accompanied by acoustic guitar) praising the virtues of anthropology was written by a then-MA student in anthropology. The page showing her casually performing the song has been visited by nearly 180,000 viewers on her YouTube site – where, as of this writing (February 2019), the song has also garnered 631 comments.⁴⁶ To put that number into context, most anthropology books published by academic publishers sell fewer copies than the number of published comments on this 4.5-minute song. Of course, a short folk song inherently lacks the ability either to offer complex data or to make nuanced arguments. But if its limitations greatly restrict its specific message, its appeal might well attract fans to a deeper study of the discipline that produced it. And for those who go no farther, even a basic “Cultural Relativity 101” lesson holds power in our contemporary world, defined as it is by so many casual forms of Othering.

Perhaps taking notice of such individual online successes, some independent collectives of scholars have created websites intended for broader readers. For example, a group of five anthropologists based in Canada have created a virtual “Center for Imaginative Ethnography” that aims to encourage creative

43 Golub, A. (2017). “Editing Wikipedia > Writing Letters to the New York Times.” *Savage Minds*, March 6, <https://savageminds.org/2017/03/06/editing-wikipedia-writing-letters-to-the-new-york-times/>.

44 Michael Wesch (n.d.). YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/user/mwesch>.

45 Hart, K. (2019). “An Anthropologist in the World Revolution – Pt. 1.” *Perspectives in Anthropology* [blog], <https://perspectivesinanthropology.wordpress.com/2019/02/02/an-anthropologist-in-the-world-revolution-pt-1-by-keith-hart/>.

46 “Daionisio” (2009). “The Anthropology Song: A Little Bit Anthropologist.” YouTube, October 3, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHv6rw6wxjY>.

approaches to presenting ethnographic knowledge, emanating from a commitment to social change. From their vision statement:

... we are interested in exploring the border zones of ethnographic writing, performance, and sound and image-making, within and between public and private spaces.

Our projects are engaged with everyday life, with bodies, memories, and social rituals, with singularities and collectiv[i]es entangled in histories, cultures, and politics. They take a variety of forms: performances, public conversations, political mobilizations, teaching, scholarly and community gatherings and interventions, and publishing in diverse forms and venues.⁴⁷

These burgeoning efforts spearheaded by individuals and small groups may, in turn, be inspiring some established scholarly organizations that are finally creating websites meant to attract broad readerships. For example, launched in early 2016 by the New York-based Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, *Sapiens* is an “editorially independent magazine” that “aims to transform how the public understands anthropology.”⁴⁸ In two years after its launching, the website claimed to have attracted some 3 million readers from every country around the globe.⁴⁹

Beyond conventional texts, the Internet now offers novel technologies allowing us to communicate our research findings in creative formats. Anthropologists are just beginning to experiment with new software programs that do just this. For example, anthropologist Sophia Balakian has utilized a remarkable but, as yet, under-explored Google program called “Google My Maps” to create a visually arresting ethnographic story of her relationship with a refugee from Eritrea; Balakian tells the story by embedding it in a dynamic set of online maps.⁵⁰ Given the spatial component of all our research as anthropologists, this tool seems an especially apt resource that might attract broad interest to our work.

47 Center for Imaginative Ethnography (n.d.), <http://imaginativeethnography.org/welcome/>. For other independently curated blogs, see Allegra, <http://allegralaboratory.net/>; <http://publicanthropologist.cmi.no/>.

48 *Sapiens: Anthropology/Everything Human* (n.d.). Wenner-Gren Foundation, <https://www.sapiens.org>.

49 *Sapiens*. (n.d.), <https://sapiens.submittable.com/submit>.

50 Balakian, S. (2011). “Mapping a Lost Friend.” https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/o/viewer?ie=UTF&msa=0&mid=196yqpyvTiXmLj1smiEJCx71_FQ&ll=32.43470704786532%2C-42.30231549999996&z=3.

How might anthropologists interested in the lives of children, in particular, make use of these new approaches and technologies?

5 Writing Creatively about Children

The classic dictum, “form follows content,” is a truism long espoused by many varieties of creative people, from designers and filmmakers to computer app inventors and sound engineers.⁵¹ Poets, especially, have honed the effects of the maxim in creating poems that visually illustrate whatever ideas or emotions the poem aims to convey. Perhaps “concrete poetry” (sometimes referred to as “visual verse,” “shape verse,” or a “shape poem”) is the most obvious instantiation of the dictum. In a “concrete” poem, “the shape of the poem on the page symbolizes the content of the poem . . . form follows function. The poem’s visual form reveals its content and is integral to it.”⁵²

Concrete poetry might seem a far cry from the anthropology of childhood, but I suggest that the logic behind its creation — “form follows content” — might effectively be harnessed by ethnographers of children. Here is what I have in mind.

Biologically, children are perhaps the most creative of all categories of humans. If we want “form to follow content” in communicating ideas about the lives of children we have gotten to know in a given community anywhere in the world, it would make sense for these frequently unpredictable and wildly inventive subjects to inspire wildly inventive ways to share their worlds with readers. And in fact, perhaps for this very reason, some of the most creative works published by anthropologists to date are those that address children’s lives.

5.1 *Metalogues, Children’s Books, Comic Strips*

Consider the ever-maverick Gregory Bateson (who was, for some years, married to Margaret Mead, with whom he had a daughter, Mary Catherine). Back

51 E.g., Schmidt, M. (n.d.). code2design, <https://www.code2design.de/en/process/>; Clark, D. (2018), “The Image You Missed: Superb Study of the Void between Two Men’s Times.” *The Irish Times*, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/the-image-you-missed-superb-study-of-the-void-between-two-men-s-times-1.3591055>; Bentley-Payne, J. (2017). “iA Writer 5 for iOS Released.” *The Appademic* [blog post], November 17, <https://appademic.tech/ia-writer-5-for-ios-released/>; Burnett, J. (2008). “Large Cinema Sound Systems.” Lenard Audio Institute, http://education.lenardaudio.com/en/17_cinema_5.html.

52 Unst, A. (n.d.). “The Concrete Poem Form.” <http://www.baymoon.com/~ariadne/form/concrete.htm>.

in the 1960s, Bateson invented a charming genre of writing that he called “metalogues.” In these short texts, he composed partly fictionalized conversations about the most arcane of intellectual topics — conversations that he supposedly held with his (partly imagined) daughter (whose real-life model grew up to become anthropologist, Mary Catherine Bateson). Consider this excerpt from one of those “metalogues:”

Metalogue: Why Do Frenchmen?

Daughter: Daddy, why do Frenchmen wave their arms about?

Father: What do you mean?

D: I mean when they talk. Why do they wave their arms and all that?

F: Well — why do you smile? Or why do you stamp your foot sometimes?

D: But that’s not the same thing, Daddy. I don’t wave my arms about like a Frenchman does. I don’t believe they can stop doing it, Daddy. Can they?

F: I don’t know — they might find it hard to stop . . . Can you stop smiling?

D: But Daddy, I don’t smile all the time. It’s hard to stop when I feel like smiling. But I don’t feel like it *all* the time. And then I stop.

F: That’s true. But then a Frenchman doesn’t wave his arms in the same way all the time. Sometimes he waves them in one way and sometimes in another — and sometimes, I think, he stops waving them.

Although this semi-fictionalized conversation no doubt embellished the adult-like character of the conversation, any parent of a thoughtful child might recognize the naïve yet reflective curiosity that lay behind an inquisitive child’s relentless questions. In that sense, the “metalogue” genre that Bateson created — a partly fictionalized conversation about philosophically compelling issues — seems ideal as a container for presenting, at once, an authentic and compelling ethnography of his tiny research community of one – his own young daughter.

In recent years, some innovative anthropologists have followed in Bateson’s footsteps, drawing creatively from other genres to convey ethnographic information in lively or unexpected formats. Consider, for example, an autobiographical children’s book recently published by eminent anthropologist, Ruth Behar.⁵³ The book narrates the story of Behar’s difficult early years in the U.S. as a young, Jewish, Spanish-speaking migrant from Cuba. It is a story that Behar

53 Behar, R. (2017). *Lucky Broken Girl*. Penguin.

has already told movingly in a long essay intended for adult readers,⁵⁴ but she has now retold it for middle-school-age readers. Writing about children's lives for child readers seems an obvious enough tactic, yet few anthropologists have considered this audience worthy of their efforts. Still, as Behar herself has said, "Young people need to read historical fiction to get out of their comfort zones and see that things weren't always the way they are now."⁵⁵ The fact that Behar's book has won the Pura Belpré Award for a literary work about Latin/a children or youth by a Latino/an author, and was also a finalist for the Children's History Book Prize, suggests the power that compelling ethnographic writing about children's lives has to reach many young writers. As the *Harry Potter* series did for fantasy writing, writing ethnographically for children has the potential to create a generation of adults interested in learning from anthropology.

New inventive ethnographic writing about children also includes a textbook by American anthropologist of childhood and education, Sally Campbell Galman, focused on how to ethnographically study children — but written in the form of an illustrated book drawing on the genre of comic strips.⁵⁶ In fact, this is the third in a trilogy of books written by Galman, who also happens to be a talented artist, and she has applied both her verbal and artistic skills to creating a trio of comic book-style textbooks that have proven wildly successful with students.⁵⁷ Aside from their obvious visual interest, Galman points out that "Comics have the potential to democratize the academic establishment, or at least question and then expand the boundaries of legitimacy."⁵⁸ Other anthropologists have, likewise, found themselves inspired by the scholarly potential of the comic strip. Matt Thompson has now created a series of ten posts (to date) showcasing a variety of illustrated texts that are either created by

54 Behar, R. (1996). "The Girl in the Cast." In: *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart*. Beacon Press.

55 New York Historical Society Museum & Library (2017). "Children's History Book Prize Finalist: Ruth Behar on 'Lucky Broken Girl.'" *History Detectives* March 30, <https://historydetectives.nyhistory.org/2018/03/childrens-history-book-prize-finalist-ruth-behar-lucky-broken-girl/>.

56 Galman, S. C. (2019). *Naptime at the O.K Corral: Beginner's Guide to Childhood Ethnography*. Routledge.

57 The first two books in the trio are: Galman, S.C. (2007). *Shane, the Lone Ethnographer: A Beginner's Guide to Ethnography*. AltaMira Press; Galman, S.C. (2017). *The Good, the Bad, and the Data: Shane the Lone Ethnographer's Basic Guide to Qualitative Data Analysis*. Routledge.

58 Thompson, M. and Galman, S. C. (2011). "Illustrated Man, #7 – Shane, the Lone Ethnographer." *Savage Minds* August 18, <https://savageminds.org/2011/08/18/illustrated-man-7-shane-the-lone-ethnographer/>.

anthropologists, or in which he finds anthropological relevance.⁵⁹ The playful nature of the comic strip seems especially well suited to convey an ethnography of children — a perfect exemplar of “form following content.”

5.2 *Parody*

Assuming stable surroundings (a presumed “given” that is, unfortunately, far from given for far too many children being raised in war-torn and other unstable contexts), children find many ways to play. If comic strips speak directly to their playful nature, other genres may allude to this component of children’s lives more indirectly.

My own contribution to drawing on a playful approach to writing evokes a more adult-like form of play: parody. In two editions of a set of imagined local childcare guides that I co-edited with psychologist Judy DeLoache,⁶⁰ our contributors implicitly poke fun of the 2,000 or so parenting books currently in print in English. These books are now joined by uncountable numbers of blogs about parenting, written mostly by mothers — who often recommend their favorite books to their online fans. Nowadays, the U.S. even boasts parenting book clubs dedicated to parents meeting regularly (either in person or online) to discuss volume after volume of entries on the ever-growing list of childcare guides.

Most of these parenting books are written as though they offer the only authoritative advice relevant for all children. What sorts of wisdom do these best-selling books dispense? Well, they assume an “Everybaby” who somehow exists outside culture.

But, as anthropologists can easily appreciate, babies’ lives are not just a biological given; they are as deeply shaped by cultural and political forces as are the lives of their caretakers. How might anthropologists challenge the universalist claims made implicitly in books written in a “How-to” genre that assumes universality? In *A World of Babies*, our authors adopt the familiar genre of parenting guide, but fill it with unfamiliar content. In presenting fictionalized but ethnographically accurate parenting manuals, the idea is to highlight, rather than obscure, the multi-leveled cultural, economic, political, and religious contexts that shape child-rearing everywhere. The explosion of child-rearing books raises the basic question: What is the best way to raise children?

59 Thompson, M. (2010–17). “Illustrated Man.” *Savage Minds*, <https://savageminds.org/tag/illustrated-man/>.

60 DeLoache, J. and Gottlieb, A. eds. (2000). *A World of Babies: Imagined Childcare Guides for Seven Societies*. 1st edition. Cambridge University Press; Gottlieb, A. and DeLoache, J. eds. (2017). *A World of Babies: Imagined Childcare Guides for Eight Societies*. 2nd edition. Cambridge University Press.

Collectively, the multiple sets of child-rearing guidelines our two volumes present suggest that there is no single “best” way to raise children. No set of child-rearing advice can possibly work for all children everywhere, because of so many factors — from moralscapes to politiscapes — that shape the textures of families’ lives.

The writing style of the books further highlights that multiplicity of advice. All our chapters have dual authorship: the actual author — who is a scholar specializing in the child-rearing practices of the society described; and an imagined author — who is a parenting expert in the community described (based on actual individuals known by the ethnographers), offering advice about how babies should be cared for. Following the format of conventional child-rearing guides, every chapter is written in the second person — addressing the reader as if s/he were a parent seeking child-rearing advice. With this dual-layered authorship, each chapter effectively serves as a parody of the thousands of parenting manuals on the market, each of which claims authoritative and universally relevant knowledge.

New Yorker writer, Brendan Gill, once wrote, “Parody is homage gone sour.” As such, parody presents a powerful genre through which scholars can critique taken-for-granted truths in a way that can at once captivate, delight, and educate readers. In *A World of Babies*, we play with the possibility of parody as a means for conveying ethnographic knowledge to a broad audience. In crafting an admittedly bizarre method to present ethnographic information, the disjunctions produced by a series of slippages help contribute to the parodic tone of the book.

As our most innovative artists and scientists demonstrate, we should not fear the liminal, that space of “betwixt and between.”⁶¹ That can be, and often is, where greatness lies. Perhaps parody offers the quintessential writing genre precisely because it basks in liminality — where it revels in the uncomfortable but productive space between the serious and the humorous. As such, I suggest that ethnographic parody has much to offer anthropologists: it is an under-utilized genre that packs a powerful punch.

The Facebook page for *A World of Babies* (created at the urging of our publicist) has now been seen by some 3/4 million people in 48 countries in the ~ 3 years since the book’s publication. That number represents several orders of magnitude more people who have ever read (or, doubtless, will ever read) our contributors’ scholarly work. With this outreach potential, we have used the Facebook page to promote the public uses of anthropology, and the value of

61 Turner, V. (1967). “Betwixt and between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*.” In V. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp. 93–111.

the discipline for understanding the contemporary worlds of children, and the lives of ordinary families. When (inspired by fiction writer, Philip Graham) we came up with the quirky writing style of *A World of Babies* to attract general readers beyond fellow scholars to the anthropology of childhood, we thought that was the end of the story. Thanks to the global reach of the Internet, it turned out that was only the beginning.

5.3 *An Object Lesson in Writing Style*

What difference does writing in a user-friendly way make? In this penultimate section, I offer a pair of texts from my own corpus to illustrate the differential impact that scientific versus personal writing styles may have.

Let us consider a pair of descriptions of the same event written up in two very different ways, from two very different books. The first is a single paragraph that appears in my scholarly ethnography of Beng childcare practices.⁶² I begin that discussion by explaining that when a Beng child in Côte d'Ivoire is just a few days old, he or she

is the subject of a . . . major ritual . . . The maternal grandmother (or another older woman) makes a necklace from a savanna grass of the same name. This necklace will be worn night and day by the infant to encourage general health and growth, until it eventually tears and falls off. At that point, depending on the baby's age and the mother's industry, it may or may not be replaced. The ritual to attach the first necklace is held in a rather secluded and dimly lit space – inside the bedroom of the infant's mother – and with a solemn tone. After this first necklace is applied, the mother or grandmother is permitted to add other items of more complex jewelry with beads, shells and other ornaments.

That is the sort of passage in which we scholars specialize, replete with passive constructions, and an attempt to distill multiple singular experiences into a single, generic one.

Now let us revisit the passage as I re-wrote it completely in the memoir co-authored with writer Philip Graham, which takes a more humanistic approach to anthropology and presents ethnographic content through narrative.⁶³ Rather than hiding my presence in the scene just quoted, in our fieldwork memoir,

62 Gottlieb, A. (2004). *The Afterlife Is where We Come from: The Culture of Infancy in West Africa*. University of Chicago Press.

63 Gottlieb, A. and Graham, P. (2012). *Braided Worlds*.

I put myself back in the picture. Here is that passage re-written as a single scene, and populated by named individuals:

“Good morning, Little Sister,” I said to Au, straining to identify the other faces in her darkened bedroom.

“Good morning, Big Sister,” Au half-sang out, shifting a four-day-old baby closer to her breast.

In the corner, I made out an elderly woman twisting dried grasses into string. “Good morning, Grandmother.”

“Good morning,” she muttered. Why so unhappy? Maybe her knotting work wasn’t going well in the dark. On the day a newborn’s umbilical stump drops off, the baby’s grandmother makes a dried grass necklace, bracelet, and waistband for her grandchild. So this woman must be Au’s mother. Perhaps she’d become chattier once she finished her grandson’s jewelry.

Au motioned me over to a spot near her. I settled onto a cloth and unpacked my bag of tricks: video camera, still camera, tripod, notebook, pen. Barely a week in the village, and already I was invited to watch and videotape a precious ritual for a newborn. Though laden with gear, I felt light with excitement.

I started scribbling notes. Hadn’t Amenan said that aunts also attend this ritual? I couldn’t see anyone else. In any case, if the ritual followed Amenan’s schedule, the elder in the corner would soon tie three bands around the baby’s neck, wrist, and waist, intoning a prayer to her ancestors.

I removed the lens cap from the video camera. Looking through the viewfinder, I pointed at baby Kouakou and tried to focus on the small bundle obscured in shadow.

“No, no, no!” shouted the old woman, wagging a finger at me.

“It’s fine, Mama,” Au intervened. “Let the lady take her pictures.”

“I refuse!” the old woman said. “If she takes pictures, I’m leaving.”

Flinching at this rejection, I clicked the lens cap back onto the lens and began stuffing the video camera back into its bag. Why had I assumed that Au’s invitation meant that anyone else present at the ritual would agree to my videotaping it? I’d never brought a video camera to Bengland before and clearly had to revisit anthropological protocol. My only hope now was to remain as a fly on the wall.

“Don’t worry about it, *àh gríh gríh ey*,” asserted a woman’s voice from another corner of the room — It’s not a big deal.

“What’s *she* doing here, anyway?” hissed the grandmother, nodding scornfully in my direction.

“I invited her,” responded Au. “She’s going to record the ceremony. It’s good, leave her be.”

Au turned to me. “Go ahead, Big Sister, start your camera. Don’t mind my mother, she’s just old-fashioned.”

“Yes, go ahead and start taking pictures,” added the other woman. “Don’t mind the old lady.”

“If you don’t want to talk into the camera,” Au rebuked her mother in a shockingly firm tone, “then you don’t have to. But *we* can still talk to the camera, and the lady can still take the pictures.”

From another dark corner of the room, yet another woman’s voice joined the dispute. “*You* don’t have to talk to the camera if you don’t want to,” this woman addressed the elder, “but leave the lady alone.”

“Well, don’t ask *me* any questions,” the grandmother warned me.

“Of course, Grandmother,” I murmured, amazed at the three young women flouting their elder’s authority.

Still, I hesitated as my finger hovered above the Start button: so much for The Triumphant Welcome of the Returning Anthropologist.

Then I did some quick calculations. The old woman was outnumbered at least three-to-one, or maybe the room’s shadows concealed even more women. By the standards of democracy, I should go with the majority and keep taping. Besides, I doubted I’d get another invitation to film a first jewelry ritual for a newborn this summer. But the old woman was an elder. In Beng villages, that means a lot. Didn’t her opinion count more than any number of opinions of younger women?

We anthropologists pride ourselves for respecting the wishes of the local community — but this tiny Beng “community” of four closely related women was itself sharply divided. I felt stuck in a moral impasse.

“Amwé, aren’t you going to take pictures?” Au asked as she held out the baby’s tiny wrist to her mother.

I’m probably making the wrong decision, I worried as I removed the lens cap. Another story to confess to my students the next time I’d teach a fieldwork methods class.

This passage provides abundant sensory details to humanize the story, which then becomes a personal drama of one particular event – rather than a generic telling of something that happens identically every time. Putting myself in the story also required me to come to terms with troubling ethical challenges inherent in the research process. In that sense, the humanistic approach also

proved the more scientific, insofar as it was more honest – and, therefore, more complete.

6 Closing Thoughts

I end this reflection with a long-ago but still-resonant memory.

When I first decided to become an anthropologist at the age of 19, Margaret Mead was very much on my mind. I had seen her charisma up close when I saw her speak to a small group in New York, and I'd read as much of her work as I could find – impressed by her ability to translate arcane ethnographic knowledge into a format that ordinary people without PhDs could not only understand, but that they eagerly sought out and devoured. Challenging our frequent bouts of disciplinary depression about our irrelevance, Margaret Mead taught us that readers around the globe hunger for the sort of broad-ranging knowledge of the human world in which anthropologists specialize. If she were still alive today, I have no doubt that Mead would be our discipline's premier blogger.

I have not identified a scholar living today who equals Margaret Mead's level of energy and vision. Instead, we must collectively take up the slot that Margaret Mead forged as one extraordinary person.

Many anthropologists choose our discipline in a quest to expose unequal opportunities and challenge injustice – whether due to age, race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, health status, career choice, neighborhood, educational level, or other structural components of our complex identities. We believe that anthropology has the intellectual capacity to change people's understanding of the human condition for the better by confronting racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and all other forms of "Othering;" by analyzing the devastating effects of inequality; and by pointing out different modes of living and different institutional structures in other times and other places, reminding us of the non-inevitability of particular institutions. After exposing inequalities, many of us further hope that our writings might serve to expand opportunities for the disadvantaged – whether on a local, national, or global scale. Writing jargon-filled work destined for scholarly journals or books that attract, at best, a few hundred (or even a few dozen) readers limits severely whatever impact we may hope to have on whatever corner of the world where we have chosen to focus our research.

The story of the 21st century is the story of globalization. Historians may trace globalization back to 1492, when Columbus bridged Europe with the Americas; or to 1456, when Portugal-backed navigators began sailing down the

west coast of Africa and re-“discovered” the Cabo Verde islands; or to some 2,600 years ago, when Phoenician mariners sailed around the entirety of Africa; or even to ~50,000 years ago, when early modern humans began leaving Africa to explore the lands to the north that later became named Europe. However early we want to date the onset of globalization, there’s no doubt that the current version of globalization looks far, far different from any of its predecessors.

Nowadays, the Internet provides so many of us with instant access to “other” ways of eating, praying, dressing, healing, dancing, even calculating. Offline, air travel provides many of us with close-to-instant access to such “other” ways of being. And, depending on where we live, even just stepping out the door may bring a high likelihood of encountering an adult disciplining a child in a way we don’t approve of, or someone speaking a language we don’t understand, or sporting a hairstyle we find bizarre, or listening to music that doesn’t sound like “music” to our ears.

In short, encountering “Otherness” is the name of the game in the 21st century. Unfortunately, those encounters aren’t always friendly. Equally distressing are the often disturbingly stereotyped images of “others” that confront many of us daily, whether on billboards, in politicians’ rhetoric, or on Facebook. With immigrants and refugees and, currently, in Trump’s America, their children, routinely demonized and even de-humanized to the point of being locked in zoo-like cages,⁶⁴ our globalized world needs anthropology now more than ever. Who better than anthropologists to provide the comparative framework linking the global and the local, to humanize both near and distant “others,” to explain seemingly inexplicable behavior . . . in short, to propose creative ways to address the extraordinary opportunities and challenges of the 21st century?

But our brilliant insights into “other” ways of being can only educate readers if we can write in a way that will draw them into the text, from the first sentence on. The world’s children (whether healthy, sick, or dying, and whether living in communities that are thriving, scattered, or shattered) deserve the strongest, most compelling voices to explain their lives and advocate for their interests.

Global issues concerning the world’s most vulnerable populations regularly make news headlines – children without access to basic health care (400 million), children who are unable to attend school (263 million), children whose growth is stunted from under-nutrition (150 million), children displaced from their homes due to war, violence, or political upheaval (31 million), and so on.

64 E.g., BBC (2018). “Trump Migrant Separation Policy: Children ‘in Cages’ in Texas.” June 18, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44518942>.

But what can readers learn about the lives of individual children behind these disturbing statistics? Without understanding the texture of daily life behind the counts, these numbers only serve to numb. Jargon-filled prose littered with passive constructions will draw in no more readers than will the economists' statistics or the political scientists' structural analyses.

By contrast, when long-term ethnographic engagements combine with linguistic skills, anthropologists are better equipped than practitioners of just about any other profession to probe the humanity behind the numbers. And we are also well positioned to link the daily texture of children's lives to the institutions that perpetuate the structures of their surroundings (whether they benefit from privilege or suffer from privation). Only riveting prose, perhaps combined with creative genres, will find us the readers hungry for the knowledge that anthropologists can best communicate, as we bridge the micro with the macro.

Writing choices are always chosen, whether or not we acknowledge them. Our decisions about voice should be made to bring out most effectively and appropriately the issues at hand. It's time for us to collectively harness the powers of creative writing strategies and 21st century technologies to do just that.

As Keith Hart has recently written, "The world is changing all around us and anthropology must try to keep up, not just because we study this world as anthropologists, but because our students live in it and they are rapidly leaving their teachers behind."⁶⁵ Hart has online communications in particular in mind, but the point is easily expanded to other writing modes. As Sally Campbell Galman has said in an interview about her comic book-style textbook series:

any time we push the boundaries of what "counts" as a legitimate text, of who can be the voice of scholarship and science, of what that "voice" looks like and of who we purport our readership to be we democratize the profession and make knowledge more accessible to more people.⁶⁶

Happily, we anthropologists are, finally, learning skills from journalists, bloggers, and other adventurous writers – and *vice versa*, I hope. And so, the conversation continues.

65 Hart, K. (2019). *An Anthropologist in the World Revolution*.

66 Thompson, M. and Galman, S.C. (2011). "Illustrated Man, #7 – Shane, the Lone Ethnographer." August 18, <https://savageminds.org/2011/08/18/illustrated-man-7-shane-the-lone-ethnographer/>.

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Bits and pieces of this essay have appeared in different forms elsewhere:

- (2016). “Ways of Writing Anthropology.” In: H. Wulff, H., ed. *The Anthropologist as Writer: Training, Practice, Genres*. Berghahn.
- (2015). “Anthropological Writing.” In: D. Boyer and U. Hannerz, eds. *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 2nd edition. Elsevier Publishers.
- (1997) “Guest Editorial: The Perils of Popularizing Anthropology.” *Anthropology Today* 13(1).

For a lifetime of inspiration, I am grateful to my co-author and life partner, writer Philip Graham.

The Power of Stories: Comment on Alma Gottlieb's "Writing about Children for a Public Forum"

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When reading Alma Gottlieb's article "Writing About Children for a Public Forum," my initial thought was that the description of the anthropological discipline's reluctance to engage with the public was somewhat overstated. This could be a result of me being from and in Norway where anthropologists have a long tradition of intellectual activism and engaging with the public,⁶⁷ or/and having for the last 15 years situated myself within the critical turn in social anthropology, where public engagement is a vital political and ethical commitment. Within this tradition, it has not been so much a question of having or not public engagement, but rather a question of how we engage and what considerations we need to take when we want to speak or write a public ethnography. What difference can we as ethnographers do with our ethnographies and descriptions of lifeworlds other than our own? What sets anthropologists apart from other publicly engaged social scientists, or journalists for that matter?

Gottlieb's main concern is how we might best convey ethnographic research on children in a manner that will appeal to ordinary readers. I agree with Gottlieb that one of our most powerful tools is our ability to tell stories, and that the creativity of children themselves can help us formulate them. I am less convinced that it is only new creative approaches and literary techniques that will engage the public, important as these are. I think we also need to ask what ethnography does that other modes of understanding the world do not, or do but in a different manner.

Ethnographers have long used narratives to draw on lived lives that illuminate the complexities of human experience. These storytelling techniques help us move beyond, as Gottlieb suggests, the more generalized picture of human lives often conveyed in public debates. However, for ethnographic stories to work they need to have some sort of intellectual authority, and in that we need to draw on ethnographic scholarship. Didier Fassin has a compelling

67 Howell, S. (2011). "Norwegian Academic Anthropologists in Public Spaces." *Current Anthropology* 51(2): 269–77.

argument in this regard.⁶⁸ He suggests that four specific and interlinked effects give authority to ethnographic stories: *verification*, our presence in the field; *reflexivity*, our personal involvement; *realism*, our descriptions generate concrete, evocative even, knowledge that other rhetorical forms do not; and lastly *proximity*, that the public find themselves immersed in the scene depicted. These four effects, Fassin argues, are recognizable traits of ethnographic scholarship – a methodology that has resisted many theoretical and conceptual turns in anthropology.

Despite deep involvement, time and energy in doing fieldwork, ethnography is frequently accused of being anecdotal. This has political implications. As the stories we tell from one place are not generalizable to another, ethnography has also lost its relevance. It is seen as difficult to conclude on the findings of ethnographies, and in turn problematic for policy makers to act on these findings. Gottlieb maintains, as does Thomas Eriksen,⁶⁹ that we take the advice of more stories and less theory, or more narrative in our engagement than analysis. I will argue the opposite. Although narrative as a literary genre is important, our stories need to engage with theory to remain powerful. We should not only share information, but also tell stories to bring material, data, beliefs and theories to life.

In our production of ethnographic understanding in a public domain, I believe our challenge is to show how useful theory derives from and are relevant to ordinary life. Importantly, it is only with the help of theory that we can bring grounded rich ethnographies in relation to the larger issues of contemporary social life.

68 Fassin, D. (2017). "Introduction. When Ethnography Gets Public." In: D. Fassin, ed. *If Truth Be Told: The Politics of Public Ethnography*. Duke University Press.

69 Eriksen, T.E. (2006). *Engaging Anthropology: The Case for a Public Presence*. Berg.

Children and Public Anthropology: Comment on Alma Gottlieb's "Writing about Children for a Public Forum"

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This piece by Alma Gottlieb is both a description of the kinds of writing and communication that would be of enormous benefit to anthropology and is itself a model of that writing. It is appropriate that Gottlieb opens her article with a reflection on Margaret Mead. When Margaret Mead described why anthropologists do the work that we do, she insisted upon the value of knowing and transmitting knowledge about ways of existence lived "bravely and well."⁷⁰ Mead wrote at a very powerful time in the history of anthropology and ethnography, when knowledge of other societies and cultures was seen not only as valuable in and of itself, but also served to remind us of the possibilities open to all human beings for ordering and reordering our lives. Knowledge of other cultures was an invitation to ethical and moral reflection.

If ethnographies of Mead's era could sometimes feel like a Wonder Book, this was accomplished with a bit of sleight of hand. Ideas like the "ethnographic present" often distorted the realities of people's lives by turning the eye away from the many forms of inequality – both old and emerging – that affected people's lives. There is no doubt that anthropology has gone a long way towards addressing these issues, however incompletely. At the same time, however, a hyper-theorized anthropology clearly stripped ethnography of its wonder – except for the sheer wonder that anyone outside the academy would bother to read it. There was a time when anthropologists would recoil from the charge made by other social and behavioral sciences that "anthropology was just stories." But as Gottlieb makes plain, in this age of globalized inequity it is precisely a narrative-driven ethnography that will keep anthropology alive.

Gottlieb documents many instances of anthropology moving in this narrative direction. But she delineates the tensions that exist between writing in readable ways and writing for the academy, exemplified by the loss of professional respect that Mead endured as a result of her popularity. I remember clearly that when I was a young graduate student, Oscar Lewis's writing received a similar drubbing at the hands of some of his colleagues, perhaps as

70 Mead, M. (1928). "Samoan Children at Work and Play." *Natural History* 28: 626–636.

cautionary note to new graduate students. We can only hope that the proliferation of alternative platforms and types of ethnography that Gottlieb documents in this piece will be transformative, so that the boundaries between writing for the public forum and writing for our colleagues and students will begin to soften. We assuredly do not want this new kind of writing to be a form of “popular science” – an interpretation of anthropology intended for general audiences while “real” anthropology remains the domain of professionals. The revolution in writing is as important within the academy as in the interface between professional anthropology and the outside world.

The ability of narrative-driven anthropology to enlighten and astonish remains very strong in the anthropology of children and childhood, where Gottlieb has made her most significant contributions. And while I have long admired the quality of her writing, and reading this piece has made me aware of the energy and commitment she has brought to this task, I have equal admiration for Gottlieb’s moral vision. Her book, *The Afterlife is Where We Come From*, reveals the extraordinary world of Beng babies, in which infants burst from the afterlife into this world as fully-formed persons from the past.⁷¹ This understanding infuses the Beng’s social and moral relationships of nurturing and care and friendship and respect for the abilities of children. This idea that the worlds of childhood could be constructed in both a radically different and inviting way is what links Gottlieb to Mead and her contemporaries. It draws us into the debate about how we think about children.

Another example of the way ethnography invites us into the public domain is found in an episode from the work of Carolina Izquierdo from her research with the Matsigenka people of the Peruvian Amazon.⁷² The episode was popularized by the journalist Elizabeth Kolbert in her article “Spoiled Rotten,” which appeared in the *New Yorker* in 2012.⁷³ The Matsigenka roof their houses with the leaves of a particular palm tree and Izquierdo accompanied a local family on a leaf-gathering expedition. Yanira, a member of another family asked if she could come along and the group spent five days near a river during which Yanira, who had no clear role in the group, made herself useful. As part of her daily routine, she pitched in by sweeping the sand off sleeping mats, stacking

71 Gottlieb, A. (2004). *The Afterlife Is where We Come from: The Culture of Infancy in West Africa*. University of Chicago Press.

72 Ochs, E. and Izquierdo, C. (2009). “Responsibility in Childhood: Three Developmental Trajectories.” *Ethos* 37: 391–413.

73 Kolbert, E. (2012). “Spoiled Rotten.” *New Yorker* June 25.

leaves for transport, and fishing for crustaceans, which she cleaned, boiled, and served to the others. She was, as described by Izquierdo, “calm and self-possessed” and “asked for nothing.” What amazed both Izquierdo and later Kolbert was that Yanira was just six years old. This story formed part of a wider public debate about the competency of children in the United States and elsewhere. To put it in Mead’s terms, Yanira, a young child, was living life both “bravely and well” and her story challenges our thinking about how we raise our children.

Moral and ethical issues are present in the example Gottlieb gives us of two separate accounts of the Beng child rearing practice of attaching a savanna grass necklace to a newborn. Gottlieb characterizes the first description as the “attempt to distill multiple singular experiences into a single generic one” while the second “presents ethnographic content through narrative.” Both accounts are shaped by the anthropologist, but the latter presents us with the complexity of the social setting in which events unfold and draws us into its ethical challenges. The baby will still get the necklace, but we are learning a lot more about cleavages and tensions embedded in the setting. At the same time, it is difficult to imagine constructing an entire ethnography out of the second type of account. Virtually everything an ethnographer knows is learned in such settings, but we cannot present each and every one of them in their entirety. In the end, we will still have to do a great deal of distillation in order to create a coherent framework for understanding society and culture. Nevertheless, what remains powerful is the combination of good writing and compelling concerns about the ethics of fieldwork. There are no pat answers, political screeds, or canned politics. Simply a calling for an anthropology that informs and invites broad audience to participate in issues that come close to the heart.

Writing for and to the Public: Comment on Alma Gottlieb's "Writing about Children for a Public Forum"

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For me, Alma Gottlieb has crystalized two distinct questions for a public anthropology of childhood. Firstly, how can we write *for* the public: that is, to present our research in ways that capture the interest and imaginations of people who may have neither heard of, nor care about, that arcane discipline of anthropology. How do we write consumable and relevant research for parents with busy lives? How do we write compelling research for teachers, doctors, social workers, or police officers who may be trained in rather different ways of thinking about children? How do we write enchanting research for children so they may see that their lives are interesting and important enough to write about — and may be inspired to become part of the next generation of anthropologists? For this, Gottlieb suggests we have a lot to learn from journalists, novelists, and storytellers, as well as initiatives that bring ethnography to wider audiences: poetry, comic strips, performance.

Secondly, how can we write *to* the public? How do we write strategically in order to reach the people we are writing for? This may be a marketing question as much as an academic one. Gottlieb has detailed a number of avenues through which childhood anthropologists may catch the eyes of the adults who work for children. These include inserting oneself into established and popular genres such as parenting books or blogs, making guest contributions for mainstream journalism, or using social media or podcasts. Writing to the public means looking outside of academic journals for publication opportunities, and actively pursuing those alternate modes of reporting our research. It also means developing *agility* in our practice — the ability to rapidly switch from the slow scholarship of academia to identify and seize opportunities presented by current events and have our views heard before the news cycle ends. It means applying the insights from our discipline to critique the assumptions that may be underpinning new policies *as* they are debated, not two years later. It means watching out for examples of prejudicial public discourse in the current week and using these to bring to the public those understandings about young people we have held for decades.

Why should we write *for*, and write *to* the public? One of the great tragedies of anthropology occurs when we find ourselves writing only *for* and *to* other anthropologists. We work in a system that is set up to silo our discipline by rewarding peer esteem over utility, which makes anthropologists good at borrowing outside of our discipline but bad at sharing. We expect other disciplines and the professionals and policymakers who work with children to come and find us, (and then decipher our jargon), rather than writing *for* and *to* them. This is a broader problem than just the anthropology of childhood. Yet, as Gottlieb notes, writing *for* and writing *to* the public both form part of our ethical responsibility as childhood anthropologists to *make our research count*. Like many other marginalized groups who have their stories told through anthropologists, children's ability to be recognized and to advocate for themselves is severely curtailed by the adult-centric structures of society. Because their interests are so much in the hands of adults — parents, teachers, bus drivers, health professionals, social workers, policymakers — it is even more imperative that anthropologists write for and to those adults who hold the power to influence children's lives.

Childhood anthropologists have particular ethical responsibilities, but they also have their strengths. I believe anthropologists who write about children write the most accessible ethnography, because we know how to make our research accessible *for* children: we translate our research plans into child-friendly, often illustrated information sheets and assent forms; we interview children in adapted language; we (hopefully) report back the findings of our research to children in ways they want to engage with. We use creative and visual methodologies, drawing and photography, drama and movement. When introducing my research projects to children and inviting them to participate I tell them the "Story of Myra," my child-friendly version of Myra Bluebond-Langer's famous research with pediatric leukemia patients.⁷⁴ Children are captivated by the story of these dying children and all the adults who thought they knew best for them. "Do you think these adults were doing the right thing when they didn't tell the kids they were dying?" I will ask, and children will clamor to tell me why not. "Now of course, you are not dying," I will assure them. "But I think you have things in your life that adults think they know all about, but they don't. Do you?" My point is, we know how to package things for children. Writing for the general public, then, is just another application of the same tailoring skills, in a different style.

74 Bluebond-Langer, M. (1978). *The Private Worlds of Dying Children*. Princeton University Press.

Finally, we may write childhood anthropology for and to the public, including children, but what of writing *with* children? Children lack the power to speak for themselves, but not necessarily the will. Once they gain the power, they do. In recent events, we have seen the passion and urgency and *voice* of young people who have learnt to harness the power of social media to speak directly to the public: the Parkland survivors, the climate change protestors. Is it fair that we insist on writing on behalf of children, because they cannot, rather than making it so that they can? Could it be part of our role to support children to write for the public too? Scholars have demonstrated that children can make effective research partners⁷⁵ and effective anthropologists.⁷⁶ Not all children will want to write anthropology — nor should they have to — but some will, very much. Some may not wish to *write*, but may draw, photograph or make videos. Privileging written communication is a very adult-centric thing we do, anyway, a vestige of Western, masculine, epistemologies. How can we create opportunities to make anthropology in many forms, with children, to and for the public?

In my doctoral research, I curated children's drawings together with my own into a picture book that told the story of their lives through both their emic and my etic perspectives. That book is our collaborative ethnography and, as well as giving copies to each child co-author, copies are held by their school and their local *marae* (central building complex of the Māori community). This is one way we can “write” *with* children, *for* children, and *to* children and their community. I hope we will see many more.

75 Kellett, M., Forrest, R. (aged Ten), Dent, N. (aged Ten) and Ward, S. (aged Ten). (2004). “Just Teach Us the Skills Please, We’ll Do the Rest’: Empowering Ten-Year-Olds as Active Researchers.” *Children and Society* 18(5): 329–43.

76 Chin, E. (2001). *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture*. University of Minnesota Press.

Towards a Minor Anthropological Writing: Comment on Alma Gottlieb's "Writing about Children for a Public Forum"

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... yesterday, returning from Wawela I had some ethnological ideas,
but I can't remember what they were.

Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*⁷⁷



"We, the ethnographers" are entitled to our memories too, and the possibility of sharing them in good writing is one of the subjects Gottlieb develops in her article with a view to restoring humanity to our discipline.⁷⁸ Some of these fieldwork memoirs are at the core of her reflections on how to transform them in theories, and how we may help a non-academic public gain access to anthropological perspectives.⁷⁹ The author is thinking especially of ordinary readers who may enjoy a greater understanding of anthropology and get a handle on a world that they don't often have access to. Gottlieb is here considering two different publics: a generic one ("the hundreds of thousands of readers" whose hearts were captured by Margaret Mead) and the community

77 Malinowski, B. (1989). *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*. The Athlone Press.

78 This may also be a great "literary temptation" as Copans has written: "La tentation littéraire d'inventer le terrain est forte. L'ethnologue et son terrain sont le prétexte à une fabulation romanesque [...] Les mémoires constituent ensuite la production la plus symbolique et la plus populaire." See Copans, J. (2011). *Lenquête et ses méthodes*. Armand Colin. I think that another risk (or literary temptation) is connected to what I have called a "narrative chimera." See Taliani, S. (2015). "Histoires comme ça." *Sociétés politiques comparées* 37: 2–11.

79 See in particular the section *Writing with Readers in Mind* where she says: "Since publishing our book in 1993 [*Parallel Worlds: An Anthropologist and a Writer Encounter Africa*] many more fieldwork memoirs have been published. Of the 93 books currently listed as winners or honorable mentions for the annual Victor Turner Award for Ethnographic Writing, most put the author actively in the story."

in which we do our research (an audience that is specifically involved in the fieldwork and throughout the writing process).

Gottlieb touches on a great number of points. At times, her curiosity leads her to try to understand what makes a work of anthropology more attractive to publishers who insist on “more stories, less theory.” She then turns to review the various narrative innovations of recent years on the several platforms available (from YouTube to personal blogs and international news outlets that host forums and discussion groups run by colleagues with or without an anthropological background). For the broader question of how anthropologists communicate today, Gottlieb gradually concentrates on the relation between researchers and their *small subjects*⁸⁰ in a range of relational and narrative possibilities: from Bateson-style metalogues to parody. She herself used parody with DeLoache in their work *A World of Babies* to upset the expectations of mothers who consulted *pret-à-porter* manuals on child-care to seek suggestions on the best way to raise children, only to discover that “there is no single ‘best’ way to raise children.” In this detailed examination of the order of possible writings, one critical element emerges that I would like to dwell on and that gives me the cue for a proposal.

Gottlieb has no doubt that today, given the oracular predisposition that always distinguished her, Mead would enthusiastically seize the opportunities provided by blogs and forums to reach the broadest possible number of people. But in this bamboozled world, which the author speaks of in her “closing thoughts,” while blogs or forums are tools for immediate, direct communication, for many researchers they also risk becoming an excuse for rough-and-ready data collecting that is rapid, in some cases rapacious and inevitably misleading. In my view, this risk emerges in these reflections by Gottlieb: “Nowadays, the Internet provides so many of us with instant access to ‘other’ ways of eating, praying, dressing, healing, dancing, even calculating ... And, depending on where we live, even just stepping out the door may bring a high likelihood of encountering an adult disciplining a child in a way we don’t approve of, or someone speaking a language we don’t understand.” The web now promises a near-effortless “close-to-instant access to such ‘other,’” collecting more and more information in a hypertrophic compulsion that risks emphasizing the sensational and shocking to the detriment of steeping oneself in other people’s daily experience. Gottlieb is right to associate this kind of encounter with the favorite “game” of this century of ours (“In short, encountering ‘Otherness’ is the name of the game in the 21st century”). We can only wonder,

80 I quote here the title of Lallemand and Moal’s work. Lallemand, S. and Le Moal, G. (1981). “Un petit sujet.” *Journal des Africanistes* 51(1–2): 5–21.

unrhetorically, if it is really worth playing a game that is so distant from the methodological turning-point that founded our discipline. Other authors have yet to underline how dangerous “pretext-ethnology”⁸¹ or “a pretext-question” of the “uninitiated” with its high risk of producing a “sold-out ethnology”⁸² may be. We may still wonder, with Marc Augé, how to avoid “the illusion of an exotic answer to a historical question.”

The boundary between dissemination and production of scientific knowledge remains uncertain and problematic. However, I cannot think the solution is to trap it once and for all in the dichotomy between a simple, immediate vocabulary and an “obscure language, boring and ... virtually unreadable,” though one can agree in registering that in our discipline some authors are more readily readable than others.⁸³ The “opacity of an authentic discourse”⁸⁴ cannot always be laid at the door of the ethnographer’s lack of narrative agility. May there not be in a meaningful anthropological project that peculiar forcing of the readers to make them willing to enter into a human and social complexity that is not immediately intelligible? Abdelmalek Sayad outlines the process⁸⁵ by which one can remain inside that opacity of a language “that mobilizes all the resources of an original language and culture in order to express and explain experiences of which that culture and language know nothing, or which they reject.” In his view, it is precisely the inaccessibility of any instantaneous understanding of the story or its interpretation, because, quite literally, the words *to say it all* and share it with others are missing, that represents “perhaps

81 For the expression “ethnologie-prétexte” see Augé, M. (1977). *Pouvoirs de vie, pouvoirs de mort. Introduction à une anthropologie de la répression*. Flammarion, p. 57.

82 “Lorsqu’une discipline s’expose devant de non-initiés le risqué de contresens est toujours à craindre, mais aussi celui d’une récupération susceptible d’engendrer de graves erreurs d’interprétation.” The authors propose the notion of “demande-prétexte” and “ethnologie bradée” (in original); see Pétonnet, C. and Pouchelle, M.C. (1989). “Le rôle de l’ethnologie dans sa société.” In: M. Segalen, ed. *L’autre et le semblable. Regards sur l’ethnologie des sociétés contemporaines*. Presses du CNRS.

83 Maybe the problem lies elsewhere, in the “untenable assumptions” of our academic life, as Barley has usefully underlined: “First, it is assumed that if you are a good student you will be good at research. If you are good at research, you will be good at teaching. If you are good at teaching you will wish to go on fieldwork. None of these connections holds.” See Barley, N. (2011). *The Innocent Anthropologist: Notes from a Mud Hut*. Eland, p. 7.

84 Sayad, A. (2004). *The Suffering of Immigrants*. Polity Press, p. 7.

85 He provides vivid examples in his raw ethnography of suffering. I think in particular of Zahoua’s words, when for example she remembers that she was an enemy to her parents simply by emerging from her mother’s womb; or when she says: “Enfants illégitimes! Il [mon père] n’ose pas, et pourtant c’est ça, puisqu’on ne continue pas les parents, ce qu’ils sont. Ça doit faire mal, ça! Nous sommes pour eux comes des ‘étrangers,’ mais des ‘étranger’ de leur sang.” See Sayad, A. (2006). *Les enfants illégitimes*. Raisons d’agir, p. 126.

the most important piece of information – or at least the rarest kind of information” that “we could hope for at a time when so many well-intentioned spokesmen are speaking on behalf”⁸⁶ of the “Others.” Humanities may also help us to write on the unclearness, when people feel that something in their world starts to *smarginare*.⁸⁷

Let us return now to this mangled world of the twenty-first century to ask ourselves what contribution a minor anthropological writing can make, without this expression implying writing by, on or for children, but rather a writing that is able to “de-territorialize children.” That is to say, letting them emerge from their habitual territories to mobilize their stories through a creative treatment that is at the same time enhanced politically and collectively.⁸⁸ It would be this kind of writing that mobilizes all the resources of a language and a culture in the face of what they had not previously considered possible, but that is happening before our dazed eyes.

Let us look at the children today: at the mercy of the arbitrariness of the human condition, as in the winner of the World Press Photo that depicted a two-year-old Honduran girl, Yanela Sanchez, while her mother was taken into custody on the border between Mexico and the USA on 12 June 2018; feverish and dying, as in the case of Jakelin Caal and Felipe Alonzo Gomez, whose deaths were separated by just a few short weeks in December 2018 when they both entered North-American detention centers. Consider all the other dangerous and obscene borders, like those marking the Mediterranean Passage, such as Alan Kurdi or such as Favour, a nine-month-old baby girl, who was making the journey northwards in the arms of her Nigerian migrant mother. She arrived alone at Lampedusa Island on 25 May 2016, the last day of the journey. Her mother had died of burns in a chemical combustion of salt and

86 See Sayad, A. (2004). *The Suffering of Immigrants*. Polity Press, p. 7. As Bourdieu has pointed out in his preface, Sayad’s writing was steeped in “a solidarity of the heart,” an echo of what Gottlieb stresses in her text too (quoting Aronie’s work). Sayad’s “opacity” may also be connected to another analysis by Gottlieb on “the non-transparent nature of many seemingly transparent concepts.” See Gottlieb, A. (2000). “Where Have All the Babies Gone? Toward an Anthropology of Infants (and Their Caretakers).” *Anthropological Quarterly* 73(3): 121–132.

87 I am using here a word introduced into the imaginary of contemporary literature by Elena Ferrante. Goldstein, the English translator, writes that “*smarginatura*” is the dissolution or dissolving of boundaries around people and things.

88 I refer to *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, where Deleuze and Guattari have defined the three characteristics of minor literature: the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation. See Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (2003). *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. University of Minnesota Press.

gasoline at sea on their boat, which had capsized as they made the crossing. The Italian press displayed dozens of images of Favour – oblivious to the norms that protect the anonymity of minors – leading to a “deluge of requests to adopt her.” She was the “lucky orphan,” journalists claimed.

After more than ten years of total media blackout by the Swedish authorities, the stories of adolescent immigrants in Sweden suffering from what is known as resignation syndrome (*Uppgivenhetssyndrom*, also known as Snow White syndrome) are finally making the newspapers, as had already happened for other forced medicalization of “the children of others.” Interactive platforms are keeping the discussions alive and vital, or at least are preventing it from being forgotten.⁸⁹

But even after all this clamor, have their lives improved? Yes, no, it depends. To answer this question, we must place the intrinsic power of anthropological research and its writing in the narrow space allowed. Anthropological research and writing must include minute fieldwork, observation of the everyday, obligation to the obscene ordinary, along the frontiers, in the makeshift houses, inside the administrative detention camps or in the forms of spontaneous camps, in the streets and public squares and in any other inhabitable space where children are to be found, wherever they carry on their lives and impress on their lives a movement that challenges any fixity or rigid representation.

Though Gottlieb gives many examples, she considers the ordinary mobility of children today at the end of her analysis.⁹⁰ Now, more than ever, these children are protagonists of anthropological research and the new attempts to “write the Other” and the story of others. For example, a very powerful documentary by Haskjold Larsen, *69 Minutes of 86 Days* (2017) tells the story from the perspective of the tiny Lean, a Syrian three year old girl, who crossed

89 Regarding the Swedish case, see <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/03/the-trauma-of-facing-deportation>. Other emblematic narratives are: the “Stolen Generations’ Testimonies,” an online archive still available today of video testimonies by survivors; Otzen’s reconstruction for the BBC of the Danish government’s 1950s social experiment to remove 22 Inuit children from their families; the *Yemenite Children Affair* (between 1948 and 1950 thousands of Jewish Yemeni children were removed from their biological parents as soon as they arrived in Israel and placed with Ashkenazi families). “No body, no grave” is the naked truth repeated in the accounts collected on the platform +972. See also: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/20/world/middleeast/israel-yemenite-children-affair.html> and Weiss, M., (2001). “The Immigrating Body and the Body Politic: The ‘Yemenite Children Affair’ and Body Commodification.” *Israel Body and Society* 7: 93–109.

90 “Global issues concerning the world’s most vulnerable populations regularly make news headlines –displaced children (31 million), children without access to basic health care (400 million), children whose growth is stunted from under-nutrition (150 million), children who are unable to attend school (263 million), and so on.”

Europe to reach her grandfather in Sweden, travelling with her family. A minor anthropological writing may push anthropology of childhood out from an “anthropological ghetto,”⁹¹ to place infants, children and youths in their places: no more perceived and treated as anthropologists’ *latest lost tribe* nor marginalized once more as subjects who contribute “little to the chief concerns of most anthropologists.”⁹² We may create with them in the new major narrative style (forum, blog, Web platform) dialogues about citizenships, belongings, loyalties, kinships, displaced identities, rights and so on.⁹³

Taking for granted that there can be an anthropology of children,⁹⁴ it is worth asking: What is the important “stuff”⁹⁵ of the anthropology of childhood and youth today? Selling books, collecting stories, understanding the world, changing it and reporting social injustice and racial discrimination? Or is, rather, to create a choral re-memory, so that a creative treatment of what has been observed, remembered and “disremembered”⁹⁶ in the field can make readers feel part of and participant in the tumultuous events of this century? Anthropology is affected by a powerful coefficient of identification with the destiny of the “Other,” which is also, always and at the same time, a common destiny. And kids are tools in this, thanks to whom the power of de-territorialization, identification and imagination is amplified, given that the future world is theirs.

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- 91 Montgomery, H. (2000). “Becoming Part of This World: Anthropology, Infancy, and Childhood.” *JASO* 31(1): 15–30.
- 92 Hirschfeld, A.L. (1999). “L’enfant terrible: Anthropology and its Aversion to Children.” *Etnofoor* 12(1): 5–26. See also Hirschfeld, A.L. (2002). “Why Don’t Anthropologists Like Children?” *American Anthropologist* 104(2): 611–627; and Allison, J. (2007). “Giving Voice to Children’s Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials.” *American Anthropologist* 109(2): 261–272.
- 93 See for instance *AnthropoPod* and in particular (*W*)rap on: *Immigration* (by Arielle Janet Milkman, January 3, 2019). Inspiration of *AnthropoPod* is Baldwin and Mead’s conversation in 1970, *Rap on Race* (“constructive” for someone or at the contrary the “lowest moment” for Mead’s career for others; Howard, J. (1984). *Margaret Mead: A life*. Fawcett Colombine, p. 399.
- 94 Hardman, C. (1973). “Can There be an Anthropology of Children?” *JASO* 4(2): 85–99.
- 95 In the section *Writing with Readers in Mind*, Gottlieb talks about the advice that she received from Ed Winter and that shocked her at the time. “Just write what you remember. You’ll remember the good stuff. The important stuff. You can always check your notes later, to make sure you got the details right.”
- 96 Morrison, T. (1999). *Beloved*. Vintage.

Writing So Our Research Counts: Response to Comments

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I am grateful to these four well-chosen colleagues for engaging so thoughtfully with the issues I raise in my essay.

Reflecting aloud, collectively, about what it takes to write texts that actual readers will actually read helps us all become more conscious of our own writing habits, whatever those may be. And, simply becoming aware that we have choices about writing — that no law requires us to follow a single, required format — may empower some scholars eager for just such a release.

Our conversation might also remind us of the ways that our writing may touch individuals' lives. In the best of circumstances, our writing may even influence social policies that have the capacity to transform many more lives. For these reasons, I applaud the decision of this journal's editor, Antonio De Lauri, to solicit not just my essay, but comments from four colleagues writing from different geopolitical spaces in Europe, New Zealand, and the U.S.

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Some twenty years ago, I lamented that several factors produce the all-too-common reluctance among many anthropologists to write for “the general public.”⁹⁷ As Julie Spray specifies in her response here, one factor accounting for our frequent timidity is surely that “We work in a system that is set up to silo our discipline by rewarding peer esteem over utility, which makes anthropologists good at borrowing outside of our discipline, but bad at sharing.” I assume that Spray has in mind scholars who live their professional lives ensconced in the academy, where the structure of the workplace often rewards us for obtuse prose and penalizes us for its obverse.

Thankfully, our collective *oeuvre* contains important exceptions. In fact, one significant exception concerns writing about children. As David Rosen writes in his comment here, “The ability of narrative-driven anthropology to enlighten and astonish remains very strong in the anthropology of children

97 Gottlieb, A. (1997). “Guest Editorial: The Perils of Popularizing Anthropology.” *Anthropology Today* 13(1): 1–2.

and childhood.” In that sense, anthropologists of children have important lessons to teach colleagues specializing in other subjects and communities.

Another important exception occurs in specific spaces of the academy. In her comment here, Sidsel Roalkvam gently admonishes me that my piece comes from an Americo-centric perspective that would have far less relevance in some other places. Those places include her home country of Norway – where, as Roalkvam writes, “anthropologists have a long tradition for intellectual activism and for engaging with the public.” Indeed! My fellow U.S.-based anthropologists could learn much from our colleagues elsewhere. In my essay printed here, I noted briefly that “many European, Latin American, and Asian scholars have long engaged more comfortably with broader publics than have scholars in the U.S.” and I provided a footnote with some citations, but perhaps I ought to have shone a brighter light on these models of public engagement. The U.S. is far from #1 in this (and many other measures of) enlightened practice, and my North American colleagues and I are well advised to remain humble in the face of exemplary professional traditions elsewhere.

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For those who write about children’s lives, Julie Spray challenges us to expand our public writing in another way beyond those I suggested in my essay: she urges us to consider children as potential co-authors or other collaborators in our final products. If co-authoring with adult members of our research communities still remains somewhat rare, co-authoring with children is even more so (with some intriguing exceptions noted by Spray). (My own foray into this uncommon genre is confined to a brief essay that my husband and I co-authored with our son, incorporating some taped conversations that I had with our then-six-year-old while we were doing fieldwork in Côte d’Ivoire).⁹⁸

Yet the idea of co-authoring texts with children from one’s fieldwork community makes a great deal of sense. And co-producing final products beyond written texts with children — for example, integrating children’s drawings and other visuals – seems equally appropriate. As Spray points out: “Is it fair that we insist on writing on behalf of children, because they cannot, rather than making it so that they can? Could it be part of our role to support children to write for the public too?” Here, Spray is suggesting that we expand not just our

98 Gottlieb, A., Graham, P. and Gottlieb-Graham, N. (1998). “Infants, Ancestors, and the Afterlife: Fieldwork’s Family Values in Rural West Africa.” *Anthropology and Humanism* 23(2): 121–26.

co-authorship pool, but even the notion of what constitutes legitimate ways to communicate our scholarly findings.



If Spray encourages us to experiment even more creatively in our scholarly output, Sidsel Roalkvam appears more cautious. Given the history of successful public engagement by scholars in Norway and elsewhere, I found myself surprised to read Roalkvam staking out her argument here in another direction. She writes (as if it were a controversial statement): “for ethnographic stories to work they need to have some sort of intellectual authority and in that we need to draw on ethnographic scholarship.” How could I possibly quarrel with this assertion? And, how could any PhD-bearing scholar (in anthropology or any other discipline) disagree that the most persuasively written work must rely on a sound foundation of scholarly research? That is a *sine qua non* of all scholarship, by definition.

But Roalkvam goes further: “Gottlieb . . . maintains that we take the advice of more stories and less theory, or more narrative in our engagement than analysis. I will argue the opposite. Although narrative as a literary genre is important, our stories need to engage with theory in order to remain powerful.” Here, Roalkvam seems implicitly to assume a *zero-sum* game. In this scenario, there would be only so much goodness to go around in a scholarly work, and the more goodness is allocated to sound scholarship, the less there would be available to be allocated to beautiful prose.

But I hardly find that model accurate. “Ethnographic scholarship” is, itself, inevitably grounded in theory. By definition, then, ethnographic narrative must engage with theory. Without any analytic orientation, stories become banal, merely anecdotal – a data dump with mind-numbing effects just as unpleasant as turgid theory.

I speak from experience. Consider my own failed attempt at writing theory-less narrative.

Early in the process of writing *Parallel Worlds*, I drafted 28 pages of a chapter describing a funeral that my husband and I attended *au village*. I was initially so in love with my data that I found it hard to “separate the wheat from the chaff.” At my writer-husband’s editorial urging, I dug deep to find the essence of what I wanted to say about that funeral, and I spent hours cutting. The result? Those 28 overstuffed pages became a sleek five pages, where each action or scene reported could justify its presence in the chapter. With this much-reduced chronicle, I was able to effectively narrate the argument I wanted to make about the funeral, and my place in attending some (but not all) events.

The scene thereby contributed to the overarching argument I was building throughout my sections of the memoir concerning the role of the ethnographer in fieldwork. In that scene, as elsewhere, theory emerged in part through the choices I made in what to narrate (and what not to narrate).

When the great Dutch, early-modern architect Mies van der Rohe often proclaimed, “less is more,” he might as well have had social science theory in mind.⁹⁹ For me, the most productive question is not whether to engage with theory, but how. What I have suggested in my essay here is that the techniques of powerful prose offer us many ways to embed theory into our writing without turning off PhD-less readers who don’t enjoy “reading theory.”

Perhaps an analogy familiar to many mothers around the world might help me make my point. What to do when your kid refuses to eat a food, or even a whole class of foods, that you deem critical for health? You consider it essential for your child to imbibe the vitamins contained in this super-food (for now, let’s just say it’s a vegetable), but your kid leaves it on the plate (or spits it out) every time. Clever moms (and, nowadays, dads, too) concoct all sorts of recipes to include said ingredient(s) in their child’s meals.

Here’s a memory from my own mothering life. When our adult son (who is now an adventurous eater) was at his pickiest toddler phase, the only food item obviously belonging to the “vegetable” group he would ever eat was raw cucumber. On meat loaf night, my husband and I would shred zucchinis in the food processor, mix them with raw meat, then bake the concoction into a meat loaf that our son happily wolfed down, unaware that he was ingesting the fiber and vitamins contained in the offending summer squash. His body didn’t absorb any fewer of the vitamins than it would have, had he eaten a separate serving of the zucchini. But with the courgette buried invisibly in his delicious meat loaf, our son didn’t make faces, nor reject his meal; he actually enjoyed his dinner.

Dare I suggest (with all apologies to vegetarians) that “theory” might be the “vegetables” of writing? In that sense, I don’t view Roalkvam’s suggestion as constituting “the opposite” of what I am proposing, at all. “Theory” and “narrative” (the latter, incorporating “data”) can easily co-exist in friendly relations as long as they find the right balance. And, if we want to reach “ordinary readers” and have an impact beyond our charmed circle of fellow scholars, that balance typically must tilt drastically in the direction of “narrative” (or other user-friendly writing techniques).

99 For a discussion of the etymology of the phrase, see <https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/architecture/articles/2014/april/02/what-did-mies-van-der-rohe-mean-by-less-is-more/>.

Does that inevitably mean simplifying our writing to the point that we lose all of our scholarly acumen? In her comment here, Simona Taliani worries that, nowadays, the seductions of the Web risk making our writing into such simplistic sound-bytes that our discipline will devolve into what Marc Augé termed “fake ethnography” (or, as Taliani translates it, “pretext ethnography”).

But, that is where training in the formal techniques of narrative and other genres of “creative” writing become essential. If we view “theory” as an ally of narrative, and not its enemy, we can work to cleverly incorporate theory into narrative (and other writing forms) — starting with the very choices we make for the stories we tell.

Recently, the US literary agent Susan Rabiner (co-author of *Thinking Like Your Editor*) offered guidance to scholars seeking to publish their work with a broad audience in mind. She advised that having a cogent, clear “argument . . . allows even the most densely intellectual material to be successfully shaped and structured into a narrative — which is another way of saying it provides the connective thread that takes the readers from facts to resolution in a way that holds their attention, indeed keeps them wanting more . . . The best way to think of narrative is to see it as akin to a quest — in the case of intellectual books, a quest to unravel an intellectual mystery.”¹⁰⁰

And, as any fan of Agatha Christie, Walter Mosley, or Tony Hillerman knows, a good mystery keeps you hooked.

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As I write these lines, the U.S. houses hundreds of immigrant children sick with cancer, HIV, cerebral palsy, cystic fibrosis, and other serious illnesses. They arrived in the U.S. legally with their parents to seek effective medical treatment unavailable in their home countries. In acknowledgment of these medical emergencies, the families received special two-year visas granting them sufficient time to seek medical treatment that might keep their children alive. These families have recently received official notice that the program issuing these special, two-year visas has abruptly ended. Suddenly, the U.S. government no longer recognizes “extreme medical need” in children as a reason for extending visas. In their notices, these families were warned that they had 33 days to leave the U.S. – or risk deportation. By the time you read these words, either the courts (perhaps in lawsuits brought by the Massachusetts branch of

100 Quoted in: Toor, R. (2019). “Scholars Talk Writing: How a Literary Agent Views Academic Books.” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 22 July.

the ACLU) will have overturned the injunction in time;¹⁰¹ or, as politicians are noting, many of these children will have, in effect, received a death sentence.¹⁰²

Critical medical anthropology offers powerful theoretical frameworks to explain the structural factors behind why these children were born into nations with inadequate health care, and how they got to the point of desperation at which they have arrived. But now is not the time to cite such theory. Rather, now is the time to put theory into action. That is the power behind the extraordinary success that medical anthropologist Myra Bluebond-Langer has had in changing health policy in the U.K. The accumulation of stories she told about dying children in the U.S. ultimately translated into a position with great influence that allowed her to transform the experience of palliative care for dying children in the U.K.¹⁰³ In the U.S., today's dying migrant children need advocates with such persuasive powers. And plenty of other children's urgent stories around the world must be told in ways that people — from lawmakers to voters — hear. By itself, theory won't move xenophobic politicians' pens or TV viewers' hearts, but stories just might. As for theory, that can remain implicit in the stories we tell.

These past two years, I have joined with many other North Americans to protest policies we consider inhumane and illegal being enacted by the current administration. At all the public “town halls” I have attended, and in all the private meetings a political action group (“Indivisible”) has managed to schedule with members of our Congressional delegation, I have observed that our senators and representatives seem most responsive while listening to individual stories of hardship and suffering. The anthropologist in me sometimes balks – I'm always tempted to offer a lecture on the political economy of injustice. But I have learned to craft my theoretically grounded messages in the

101 Johnson, J. (2019). “Trump Reportedly Moving to Deport Kids with Cancer and Deadly Illnesses.” *Truth Out* 28 August, <https://truthout.org/articles/trump-reportedly-moving-to-deport-kids-with-cancer-and-deadly-illnesses/>.

102 Bixby, S. (2019). “Senator: Trump Policy Is ‘Death Sentence’ For Sick Kids.” *The Daily Beast* 29 August, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/senator-trump-policy-is-death-sentence-for-sick-kids>.

103 Her doctoral work on this research produced her first, influential book: Bluebond-Langer, M. (1978). *The Private Worlds of Dying Children*. Princeton University Press. For an eloquent, personal statement of the professional journey Bluebond-Langer has traveled, culminating in her current position of great impact, see Bluebond-Langer, M. “A Mile in My Shoes: This Story Belongs to Myra Bluebond-Langer, Shoe Size Six.” *Health & Social Care, The Empathy Museum, The Health Foundation*. <http://listen.health.org.uk/stories/myra-bluebond-langer/>.

form of stories, to catch the attention of our Congressional delegation as we continue to push them to further resist the Trump agenda.

Recently, at a meeting that our Invisible chapter held with one of our senators, I recounted that two of the most terrifying minutes of my life occurred when I briefly lost track of my daughter, then two years old, in a crowded department store (she thought she was playing “hide-and-seek”). The senator immediately countered with his own difficult memory of family separation, this time from his long-ago perspective as a child. At age four, he had a minor operation, and the hospital’s policy forbade his parents from sleeping in his room for four nights. The senator recalled his own panic that he might never see his parents again. Through sharing human memories of minor, fleeting family separations, the senator and I, along with the other parent-protestors in the room, all achieved a sense of shared outrage at a government policy that would deliberately separate parents and children for periods far, far longer than what he and I had experienced. The senator — an intelligent and well-educated man — no doubt understands the structural causes behind our current administration’s adoption of its cruel immigration policy. But somehow, our personal stories, evoked to stand in for far more catastrophic ones, seemed to have “touched a nerve,” and our senator promised to redouble his efforts to move all relevant government agencies to reunite the hundreds of immigrant families that remain separated by our government’s immigration policies.

For now, I can only hope that our senator is able to hold good on his promise. If he does, I will consider that a major victory of narrative. If he doesn’t, I will keep thinking of better stories to tell that can further move people in power.

In her response here, Simona Taliani aptly dubs our era, the “mangled world of the twenty-first century.” If anthropologists want to have any impact in alleviating the pains felt by so many during these difficult times, carefully crafted narratives and other creative means of conveying information to a hungry audience offer us powerful tools. I conclude by reminding us of the reason for wanting to use such tools effectively. As Julie Spray writes in her comment here: “our ethical responsibility as childhood anthropologists [is] to *make our research count*.”