

ON THE GENEALOGY OF WRITING ANTHROPOLOGY

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Introduction

This book is about the composition of anthropological texts. It is about the concrete arrangement of ethnographical data and analytical reflections as textual accounts written by anthropologists for a wider audience but mainly for other anthropologists. And, therefore, the book is also about creativity and about transformations – from experience to texts of different kinds.

There is often an arduous and intense process involved in giving shape to a text, which requires of the author a particular sense of loyalty to the material. Based on ethnographical data collected over extended periods of time and under conditions that are by their very nature uncontrollable, through the textual account, the author seeks to advance empirical and analytical insights with broader relevance to an academic community. This is an intricate process that moves between different levels of abstraction and makes use of different expressive and rhetorical techniques in order to transform one type of information into another. For, while ethnographical data by itself may contain enormous complexity and richness, it may not lend itself as an expressive vehicle for articulating those insights – analytical, comparative, theoretical – that the author also seeks to advance.

Depending on the particulars of the research project as well as the preferences and work habits of the individual researcher, ethnographical data may be gathered in the form of handwritten notebooks, photocopied documents, books and images and audio and textual files available from the computer or stored in the ‘cloud’. It therefore falls upon the author to develop a textual form that is loyal to the empirical data while also allowing for analytical reflections that engage with, expand upon or even challenge widely held academic assumptions. To do so is a creative accomplishment. Something is given form that is no longer entirely similar to or even the sum total of the elements that went into its making. This book is an examination of this creative and transformative process.

There is, we will argue, a specific character to the writing of anthropology. The composition of an anthropological article or chapter is not the same as the writing of a literary or historical or psychological or natural-scientific or journalistic or even sociological one, because it is informed by a disciplinary history and a disciplinary sense of what ‘data’ and ‘writing’ and ‘evidence’ and ‘authorship’ entail. *The idea of this book is to bring a unique kind of scrutiny to how individual anthropologists write, the point being to compare and to teach.* The book offers a new way of thinking about writing, and writing about writing, which represents both a pedagogic guide and a critical examination of the creative process.

The minutiae of writing

Clifford Geertz reminded us a while ago that what we do as anthropologists is first and foremost to write (1975:19). It is therefore somewhat paradoxical that what we do the most continues to be what is arguably also the one aspect of our academic practice that is hardest to capture the nature of. How do anthropologists *actually* write? In particular, what goes on from the moment ethnographical data have been gathered as fieldnotes until an anthropological account is presented in one of the many written forms available today (journal article, book chapter, monograph, blog, commentary, etc.)? These are questions that we began to ask ourselves several years ago when Morten Nielsen was the postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Cosmopolitan Studies, University of St Andrews (which Nigel Rapport had founded and [then] directed). During our weekly lunch conversations, we would often end up discussing the status of anthropological writing and the particulars of anthropological writing – or the lack thereof. For, while writing is widely acknowledged as being crucial to our academic enterprise, the minute practices of *actually* producing academic texts are less frequently examined.

To be sure, writing an anthropological text can be an intensely abstract endeavour that casts the author into hitherto unknown philosophical terrains. But it is also a slightly more mundane affair of ordering an assorted set of data and producing an account that documents its genealogy. It is the latter aspect of writing anthropology that we wish to unpack in greater detail: What do our peers concretely do to their ethnographical data, we have wondered, in order to compose anthropological accounts? Nielsen is a firm believer in the wonders of qualitative software programs for coding and ordering ethnographical data, and he continues to use these when composing more analytical anthropological texts on the kinds of effects brought about by social interaction – such as digression, distortion and temporal reversals (see Chapter 9). But from Nielsen’s ongoing conversations with colleagues, it is apparent that this technological approach may be less than widespread. Conversely, Rapport has tended to order his ethnographic material according to the individual other who first impressed it upon him and the moment of its performance: who said or did what when. To move from ethnography to analysis is then to hope to establish a broader and deeper appreciation of individual informants and how their world-views and life-projects impact upon others in their environments

(the anthropologist included). Philosophical, psychological and literary sources are borne in mind when making this move from ethnography to analytical text, so that Rapport might benefit from wider disciplinary understandings of how the human individual exists and how he or she ('Anyone') might be represented on the page.

We have asked ourselves similar questions regarding our peers' composing of anthropological accounts and their engagements with other kinds of academic texts, other forms of information: Do anthropologists write in the margins of book pages? Do they summarise the content of journal articles on separate documents? Might some anthropologists even organise their material in 'slip boxes' (*zettelkasten*) following the file card system invented by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann? And, most importantly, how are these reflections and summaries, only some of which are written down, practically connected to the ethnographical data and given the form of an anthropological account? Inspired not least by Nietzsche's genealogical approach that was 'gray, meticulous and patiently documentary' (Foucault 1984:76) – while also bearing in mind that Nietzsche insisted that one must 'mistrust all systematisers and avoid them: the will to a system is a lack of integrity' (1979:25) – our objective has been thus to unearth the mundane minutiae of writing anthropology – and to trace the creative transformations that this process entails.

The irreversible transformations of writing anthropology

Writing anthropology not only requires a particular sense of loyalty to the material, it also enforces upon it, we argue, a series of irreversible transformations. If we consider ethnographical data as the corpus of empirical information that is available to the author at the moment of writing anthropology, it does not necessarily have a determinate form. Indeed, while most anthropologists tend to write up their findings, say, as fieldnotes or transcribed interviews, crucial empirical information may also be accessible through informants' diaries, online video clips, archival documents, material artefacts, audio recordings and so on. By the very act of writing anthropology, then, it is automatically assumed that these different forms of ethnographical data can meaningfully be contained by one singular 'carrier' of information, namely text. In order to compose anthropological texts, we rely on the semantic properties of the text to articulate with clarity those qualities that we see as particularly important in the ethnographical data – and which we are capable of expressing through the medium of text. The question to be asked, however, is whether anthropological writing is simply a question of transmitting information from one semiotic medium to another. For while the transportation of ethnographical data from one medium to another is unquestionably a precondition for writing anthropology, it seems to us that the qualities of the ethnographical data that end up in the text are fundamentally different from those that may be associated with the 'original' medium. In other words, whatever qualities we ascribe to the ethnographical data in the form of, say, fieldnotes or a material artefact, the moment we transport these to a text, they turn into something else entirely.

Obviously, it is not built into the material fabric of a malaggan sculpture that it can productively serve as a comparative vehicle for examining the workings of time and memory in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere (cf. Küchler 1987, 1988). This is a quality that may be activated by the anthropologist by making relevant juxtapositions between strategically selected analytical and empirical components. The crucial point is, however, that the potentials for functioning as ethnographical data are not something that emerge by realising what the empirical phenomenon affords (Gibson 1979; Ingold 2000) – as if these were simply waiting for the anthropologist to discover. Rather, *the capacity to function as ethnographical data is an effect of the transformation that occurs when empirical information is transported from one medium to another*. The analytical efficacy, we might say, for theoretical generalisation and ethnographical comparison is an effect of the mutations that empirical information undergo as the author seeks to compose a convincing anthropological account. Or, to turn the argument on its head: The only empirical phenomena that *cannot* potentially be used as ethnographical data when writing anthropology are those that remain equal to themselves.

This also means that writing anthropology is always more than a relationship between empirical phenomenon and text that as ‘apt illustration’ (Gluckman 1961). If empirical phenomena undergo irreversible transformations in the process of composing an anthropological account, something still remains that differs from its later manifestation as textual representation. And it is by way of this ‘remainder’ that the written composition is invested with a particular kind of vibrancy or unresolved tension even, which seems to push the anthropological account beyond the semiotic modality of the text. Indeed, one wishes for the reader of the final anthropological text also to see beyond it and to have evoked for him or her an echo of another, alien modality of human performance (Tyler 1986).

Entextualisation and creativity

It can surely be imagined that some forms of ethnographical data ‘resist’ the transportation between different semiotic modalities and so lose their anthropological efficacy. One may therefore ask what it is that enables *some* empirical information to be detached from its context and inserted into that of the anthropological text but not others. Taking our cue from a recent body of scholarly work on speech acts and discursive performativity, we define the transmission and translation of empirical data from one semiotic modality to another as a particular form of ‘entextualisation’ (Babcock 1980; Bauman and Briggs 1990; Keane 1995, 1997, 2013; Urban 1996). Processes of entextualisation occur when texts and speech acts can be treated as phenomena that seem to transcend the particular circumstances of their enunciation or writing without losing consistency and significance (Keane 1995:107). As Babcock tells us, both written and oral discourses have a capacity for displacement in order to become ‘object[s] to [themselves], to refer to [themselves]’ (Babcock in Bauman and Briggs 1990:73). Even ordinary language has metalingual (or meta-discursive) properties, which objectify the speech act or text by making it its own

topic. Still, while metalanguage guides interlocutors with characterisations of what is going on (Keane 2005:72), it is not drawn from an inner catalogue of subjective thoughts but, rather, from a shared vocabulary that is used when one is reflecting on one's own actions *to* others (cf. Rapport 1993, 1997).

We will thus argue that it is through processes of entextualisation, where ethnographical and analytical data are rendered detachable, that they come to *irreversibly* differ from themselves (cf. Nielsen 2013a; 2013b). *In order for empirical information to acquire efficacy across different semiotic modalities, say, as recorded interview and as anthropological text, some metadiscursive indicators are removed or underemphasised while others are added.* But, crucially, this is also what makes them shareable. By removing certain contextual indicators and by reducing the amount of necessary information that the reader must know in order to process transported data, the more portable and potentially sharable it is (Kockelman and Bernstein 2012:344–345). In this regard, *the result of having transported empirical and analytical data from one semiotic modality to another is probably better understood as a response to and not as a replication or imitation of its prior manifestation.* The 'original' empirical information is used as catalyst or stimulus but for articulating a different narrative, whose efficacy derives from the built-in tension of difference between the former and the latter.

Through anthropological writing, then, ethnographical data and theoretical reflections are stabilised in a form that is markedly different from their earlier manifestations. And this intricate process is, we will argue, what is at the heart of what anthropological writing is about.

Moreover, as we learn from the contributors, this is a meticulous process that requires a certain mastery of academic skills and a capacity to maintain focus and an overview of huge amounts of data during long work hours. But it is also what uniquely characterises the creativity of anthropology, we think. If a creative process is one of combining or juxtaposing things and ideas directed by will or intent and whose outcome is marked by novelty (Leach 2004:152), then writing anthropology is probably as creative as our discipline gets. It is through the often seemingly unlikely juxtapositions of ethnographical data and analytical reflections that our disciplinary boundaries are creatively transcended and new insights are produced about what being human is all about.

The objective of this book

The 'writing culture' debate (Marcus and Clifford 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Geertz 1988) opened up the topic of anthropological composition to intense scrutiny and has itself become the object of much commentary (Rapport 1994; James, Hockey and Dawson 1997; Zenker and Kumoll 2010). Was anthropological writing objective? Was it ethical? Was it disciplinarily distinctive? The intent of the present volume is somewhat different. Every professional anthropologist writes – whatever their stance on 'writing culture'. How do they go about it? What is the precise process whereby anthropological experience (whether of the field or a set of data or an anthropological argument or a political-cum-moral stance)

gets translated into text? In his introductory textbook, *Social Anthropology* (1982), Edmund Leach memorably described social anthropologists' purpose as 'gaining insight into other people's behaviour, or, for that matter, into their own'. 'Insight', he went on, 'is the quality of deep understanding which, as critics, we attribute to those whom we regard as great artists, dramatists, novelists, composers (...). Social anthropologists are bad novelists rather than bad scientists' (1982:52–3). Since the 1980s, much ink has been spilt by anthropologists in an effort to improve their attitudes towards their own writing – even if not the quality of that writing itself. But two things in Leach's description remain challenging. First, that our objective is insight: a 'deep understanding' of human nature and practice such as we accrue archetypically from great 'artists'. Second, that insight into the anthropologist's own behaviour is as much a boon as insight into others': The human condition is, after all, something both share and is the very precondition of anthropology as a science. Because of a common, universal humanity and individuality, the individual anthropologist is able to go anywhere among his or her human fellows, enter into relations and hope to learn how it might be to be another individual human being in another human life. It is not solipsistic, then; to inquire into how anthropologists write is not narcissistic or self-indulgent or a decadent distraction from a 'proper' focus (*pace* Sangren 1988:423; Barnard 1988:174; Gellner 1992:7), if the aim is to extend possibilities of understanding the *human* writer: 'Anyone' as writer of meaningful texts. 'Writing' and 'text', here, are to be understood as referring less to a technique of communication than a mode of thought and of being in the world. To 'write' is to attempt to reflect on and give meaning to experience: by writing we can understand a separating of experience from reflection upon it (Stock 1983:531). Such writing is the special preserve neither of certain cultures and times (literate versus non-literate), nor of certain social classes and occupations (professionals versus workers) (cf. Berger 1979:6). As Victor Turner observed: 'There were never any innocent, unconscious savages, living in a time of unreflective and instinctive harmony. We human beings are all and always sophisticated, conscious, capable of laughter at our own institutions' (cited in Ashley 1990:xix). Writing is a meta-experience: the considered ordering of experience and the conscious production of meaning. Such writing is a human universal (Rapport 2014). 'Text', here, too, need not merely refer to the technique of writing on a page. More broadly, text can be allowed to stand for 'any body of data, in any sorts of units, which in the eyes of an observer appears systematised and thus conveys information' (Boon 1973:10). It might be composed of words – on a page, in the head, in a song – but 'text' could equally refer to musical notes, daubs of paint, religious icons, habitual behaviours, institutional officiations; hence, 'sentences, stories, parades, carnivals' (Bruner 1983:12).

'How do they write their anthropological texts?' the contributors to this volume have been asked to reflect on and recount. The question contains a number of others: 'How does one represent as text what was first experienced as non-textual?' 'How does one represent in text on the page what was first experienced as spoken text, or as the collaborative text of a social exchange?' 'May one represent in text

on the page more than an expression of the subjective phenomenology of the individual author?' Essentially, 'Is it possible to know the presence and creativity of the individual anthropologist in his or her textual composition?'

In *Works and Lives*, Clifford Geertz analysed the writings of four prominent anthropologists – Bronislaw Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, Edward Evans-Pritchard and Claude Lévi-Strauss – and compared how these authors imparted their own identity and very personal signatures to their texts. What anthropologists do, by and large, Geertz reasoned (1988:140–6), is write, and in these writings the responsibility (and the credit) of authorship cannot be displaced, however much of a burden it becomes. For these writings are 'fictions': constructs in which one form of life is represented in the categories of another (the writer's own); constructs which attempt that greatest of metaphysical leaps – into the perspectives of other people. Anthropological writings, Geertz claimed, are works of the imagination, which belong to the romancer who dreamed them up.

Imagination, dream, romance, fiction still do not sit easily in a fund of terms of anthropological self-description. We do admit to the individualism of the pursuit – how the history of the discipline is a history of individual names (cf. Kuper 1978) – and we admit to the importance of particular genres of writing – how the history of the discipline is a history of the routinisation of particular relations between the writers and readers of fieldwork reports (Strathern 1987). We grant that anthropological writing may displace existing analytical categories and extend viewpoints so that the world is apprehended anew (Strathern 1988:10–19). Finally, we allow that 'a sociocultural system' is a *method* of scrutiny rather than an *object* of scrutiny, and that this category of representation of ours may indeed obviate the phenomena it purports to describe (cf. Wagner 1975). But we are still loath to accept the individual creativity that this writing represents and the imagination, the 'romancing' or 'dreaming' (Geertz), which it calls for. To write an anthropological text is to rewrite, to textualise, social realities – and disciplinary reality. When Malinowski, Benedict, Evans-Pritchard and Lévi-Strauss use particular genres of writing – fieldnotes, articles, monographs – to write up their ethnographic experiences, Geertz urged, their work is great in its individuality; distinct in its style, personal to their lives. It entails, in Georg Simmel's terms (1971), these individual writers appropriating the conventional genres of their discipline in the project of their own self-expression. In their practice, the cultural forms and social relations of anthropology – as of the settings of the ethnographic research – are personalised and transformed: given meaning, brought to life, within the particular contexts of individual lives. It can be defined neither by the field experience nor by the disciplinary genres which preceded it. But Malinowski, Benedict, Evans-Pritchard and Lévi-Strauss are not particular in this, not unique.

The format of this book

In this book, a number of contributors, both established and reputed, and those newer to their vocation, have been invited – requested – to reflect on and to lay

bare the exact process by which word comes to follow word in a particular anthropological text that they have written. This book should be a *methodological tool* for 'students' of anthropology – a kind of instruction manual of contemporary practice – as well as a *theoretical and practical exploration and creativity* of interest to the professional reader.

Honesty and generosity are key to the success of the enterprise; the contributors should agree to elucidate a process of creativity that is normally private and personal. It is also a process that might have become habitual and also second nature; self-awareness is, then, also a key factor in the success of the venture. Can the contributors bring to consciousness the precise means by which they create a written text albeit that ordinarily such self-consciousness might stymie the act of writing?

For this reason, a particular format was devised for the volume. Each contributor would have some 7,000–8,000 words at their disposal. Of this, a smaller half ('Text') should produce or reproduce a piece of anthropological writing – a part of a possible chapter or article, or a small essay in itself. This, to repeat, could be an existing piece of writing or something produced on purpose for this exercise. Then, the larger half of the wordage ('Commentary') would be spent by the contributor explaining in detail how and why the previous text came into being as it did: how the writing came to achieve the final form it did. In one important case, the Text and Commentary would be a collaboratively written venture – instantiating the common practice of joint authorship in anthropological projects – so that we might also explore how the experiences of writing jointly manifest a distinct dynamic.

If Text presents an anthropological construct, then Commentary is a kind of deconstruction allowing the reader to approach closely enough the workings of the creative process that they may spy the production as distinct from its effects. The deconstruction of Text concerns style as well as content. What were the aesthetics of sentence construction, of vocabulary or syntax or rhythm, that were espoused? Depending on the nature of the Text, then, its deconstruction as Commentary could entail an 'archaeology' of sources and influences that stretch back days or years. It might also concern a political position, a personal ambition, an anthropological regionalism or theoreticism. The deconstruction could include marginal scribbles that took place in another book or the quotations and 'ideas for writing' from a commonplace book that the contributor keeps in a desk drawer. In other words, 'how the Text came into final being' itself contains an open-ended phenomenology. This is part of the volume's intent: *What are the contexts and the limits of the material on which anthropologists draw in their writing?* Whatever the nature of the Text, however, the Commentary should offer as precise an instruction and specification as the contributor is able to give concerning the technical history of his or her act of writing.

This is what we requested of our contributors. How they responded, you will find below. We preface each chapter with a precis of its contents, and we return to a comparative assessment of the contributions in the book's epilogue.

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