



Writing anthropology

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Writing is key in anthropology, as one of its main modes of communication. Teaching, research, publications, and outreach all build on, or consist of, writing. This entry traces how anthropological writing styles have evolved over time according to changing politics in the discipline. It starts out in the late nineteenth century, showing how early writings in the discipline aimed to be objective. While writing anthropology in a literary mode goes a long way back, it was not until the 1970s that writing began to be collectively acknowledged as a craft to be cultivated in the discipline. This led to a boom of experimental ethnographic writing from the 1980s, as part of the 'writing culture' debate. The idea behind experimental narratives was that they might convey social life more accurately than conventional academic writing. Today, literary production and culture continue to be a source of inspiration for anthropologists, as well as a topic of study. Anthropological writing ranges from creative nonfiction to memoirs, journalism, and travel writing. Writing in such non-academic genres can be a way to make anthropological approaches and findings more widely known, and can inspire academic writing to become more accessible. Recent developments in anthropological writings include collaborative text production with interlocutors and artists. However, the tendency for experimentation is also held in check, as publishing in academic publication formats and featuring in citation indices is crucial for anthropologists' careers. Still, as our writing moves increasingly online, there is a growth of flexible formats for publishing, including online books, essays on current affairs, and conversations in journals.

Introduction

Writing is essential in anthropology. As a major way of communication, teaching, research, and outreach all draw on, or result in writing. But it was not until long after anthropology emerged in the late nineteenth century that writing was first recognised as a crucial craft that required careful training. This entry spans the changing politics of writing anthropology from the late nineteenth century, when Victorian natural science notions about texts as objective was the model for scholarship, to the 1970s, when a sensitivity to style was identified, developing into a movement in the 1980s around the idea of experimental [ethnographic](#) writing as initiated by the 'writing culture' debate (Clifford & Marcus 1986). The protagonists of that debate argued in favour of more detailed accounts of research processes, including the role of the fieldworker in the composition of anthropological writing. Moving on to the twenty-first century, this entry suggests that the understanding that anthropologists are also writers has brought a new emphasis on writing in the discipline. It includes both writing accessible academic anthropology and writing in different genres, ranging from creative nonfiction to memoir, anthropological journalism, and travel writing. Anthropology has existed in a literary mode for quite some time, but as it underwent a 'literary turn' (Scholte 1987), literature has become an even stronger resource for the discipline: certainly as an influence to enhance writing styles, but also as a topic for research into literary production and culture. This is made

obvious by increasing requests for writing workshops for students and young scholars. Yet, writing remains constrained insofar as publishing is a must when making an anthropological career. Here it is governed by academic publication formats, readership, and citation indices. This entry is organised chronologically, discussing the changing politics of writing academic anthropology over time in terms of styles, publishing, and careers, including the impact of the 'literary turn', which leads to a consideration of anthropological writing genres and more recent writings for [digital](#) channels.

Changing politics of writing anthropology

Classic anthropological monographs, written as the discipline was getting established, were influenced by lingering natural scientific notions of objectivity. These monographs generally left the anthropologist outside the text, at least when it came to personal experiences and feelings, such as revelations, which were assumed to inhibit their [scientific](#) value. This applies to the works by founding anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas. Malinowski's academic work stands in particularly stark contrast to his controversial private diaries from fieldwork in New Guinea and the Trobriand Islands in 1914-1915 and 1917-1918 (Malinowski 1967). Published posthumously by his widow, the diaries revealed his personal prejudice against interlocutors as well as other problematic attitudes.

But it was the ideal of objectivity, with what would be regarded as its constrained style, that eventually provoked anthropologists to find freer forms of writing, hoping to provide more precise reflections of the richness and complexity of fieldwork. This entailed a shift to taking writing seriously, as identified in the introduction to the volume *The anthropologist as writer* (Wulff 2016: 1). Prefigured by the interest in narratives of Victor Turner and Edward Bruner in the 1950s and 1960s, a careful consideration of writing became a major feature of anthropology in the 1970s with Clifford Geertz's work, especially *The interpretation of cultures* (1973). It was Geertz who developed the concept of 'thick description' for a detailed and engaging mode of writing that provides an understanding of human action in a wider context. Geertz's seminal essay on this topic describes a cockfight in Bali and opens as follows: 'Early in April of 1958, my wife and I arrived, malarial and diffident, in a Balinese village we intended, as anthropologists, to study'. In this uneasy stage, as newcomers among people who did not acknowledge their presence, they learn after about ten days that 'a large cockfight was held in the public square'. Geertz goes on to note that cockfights are mostly illegal in Bali:

In this case, however, perhaps because they were raising money for a school that the government was unable to give them, perhaps because raids had been few recently, perhaps, as I gathered from subsequent discussion, there was a notion that necessary bribes had been paid, they thought they could take a chance on the central square and draw a larger and more enthusiastic crowd without attracting the attention of the law. They were wrong...A truck full of policemen armed with machine guns roared up (Geertz 1973b:

412-15).

The policemen ‘began to swing their guns around like gangsters in a motion picture, though not going so far as to actually fire them’. People ran, and so did the Geertzes, who found themselves hiding from the police in a courtyard with a local couple, which was what made them accepted by the villagers. It is most likely the captivating style, built with suspense and surprise, that explains why this essay has become classic, and the way the Geertzes are included in the story as protagonists who are experiencing potential danger together with locals, but then are rescued by a local couple. This turned out to be an efficient way of conveying how an ethnographic event such as an illegal cockfight could be analysed as a kind of play that mirrored major power struggles in the village.

In the 1980s, a debate known as the ‘writing culture’ debate arose, which argued for more detailed accounts of the research process, including the role of the fieldworker, in anthropological writings than what had previously been the case (Clifford & Marcus 1986). There was an expectation that the fieldwork process should include great and intimate details, including the fieldworker’s feelings and relationships, as that promised to produce a more exact account of fieldwork. A critique levelled against ‘writing culture’ was that its proponents focused too much on the activities of fieldworkers rather than on the people the research is about. The legacy of that debate is a heightened awareness of the intellectual impact of writing style, the politics of representation, and the partial truth of any account. Connected to the ‘writing culture’ debate was the idea of anthropological writing as ‘cultural critique’. It suggested that anthropology should identify alternative ways of considering what is often taken for granted in society. Anthropological writing should be part of ‘a strategy for discovering diversity in what appears to be an ever more homogenous world’ and ‘making visible to others the critical perspectives and possibilities for alternatives that exist’ (Marcus & Fischer 1987: 133). Some of those alternatives concerned the role of women in social life – insisting, for instance, that women should be given opportunities for education and careers that had of course not always been regarded as a matter of importance. Supported by the second wave of feminism, the book *Women writing culture* (Behar & Gordon 1995) explored issues of identity and difference in relation to sexual politics, [racial](#) history, and [moral](#) predicaments of anthropology. But its mission was a direct critique of the claim by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (1986), that feminist anthropologists had not written in interesting and experimental ways. The volume challenged the male dominance in the discipline at the time (see also Abu-Lughod 1993).

What proponents of experimental forms of writing share is that a sensitivity to style and an openness to other writing genres may produce more than just a pleasant turn of phrase. ‘Narrative and related writing genres may actually offer more accurate – hence, more scientific – means for us as scholars to convey the full range of the human experience’ (Gottlieb 2015: 742) than conventional academic writing. A defining feature of experimental writings today is their argument for accessibility, even though this was not necessarily a characteristic of all different stages of this movement. There is a growing understanding that

even anthropological texts about complicated issues can preferably be phrased in a lucid way, as exemplified by Ulf Hannerz (1992) and Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2018), among many others. This goes against the traditional academic norm to write in a convoluted style which can still be regarded as a marker of prestige, more so than being straight-forward. While some very complicated issues do require a more complex writing style and specialised vocabulary, many academic topics do not. This insight is gaining ground, but it also leads to the need for (re)training academics to write in a more transparent manner. Clarity and captivating narratives are more useful both in teaching and research than the writing style of some traditional [ethnographies](#) that have been referred to as 'boring' and 'virtually unreadable' (MacClancy 1996: 237). The desire for being not only clear but also more engaging has opened up space for experimental writing, such as the early *In sorcery's shadow* (1987), a memoir of an apprenticeship among the Songhay people who live in Niger and Mali in West Africa. Written by Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes as a literary essay informed by theory, it did not include explicit academic references: there is no bibliography. The memoir has been appreciated for its well-crafted narrative that also includes methodological points as Stoller learnt about and understood a way of life which was at first alien to him. The different stages of his training to become an apprentice sorcerer are carefully conveyed.

With the growth of global connections came the insight that interlocutors might, and indeed should, be able to read anthropological work about themselves without the risk of being harmed personally or politically. Such ethical issues are considered in *When they read what we write* (Brettell 1993), which mainly focuses on how this can impact the anthropologist and the writings. There is, for instance, the devastating experience of having one's published work contested by those it is about. Such experiences can be unexpected, which makes them even more painful. In addition, they might impact negatively the possibility for future research in the community for other colleagues, who might have had nothing to do with this work. Newspaper accounts of anthropological writings add complexity to this problem, especially when they misrepresent findings and if interlocutors read the newspapers but not the actual text. Highly politicised contexts such as conflicts over national language and between [ethnic groups](#) may feed into resulting dilemmas. While awareness of the difficulty of doing justice to divided communities is important, the necessity of including the studied people as a potential audience, and not only academics, remains a primary concern in contemporary anthropological writing. Existing concerns are fuelled by the rise of digital online journals and e-books, which can reach a vast and worldwide audience in an instant, particularly when they are Open Access.

All of this raises questions regarding publication outlets in relation to making an academic career, and negotiations over whether a monograph or journal article ranks the most highly (Wulff 2019; Boyer 2016). This has been a concern since the natural sciences, where journal articles are the prime publication format, became the model for citation indices and research assessments. As part of 'new public management' of European universities since the 1980s (Shore & Wright 2017), ranking systems have been in place for

publishers, their books, and journals. They attempt to emulate private sector management models and business-like approaches to improve research efficiency and results. At some universities, publishing with highly ranked publishers can thus impact positively a department's funding, as well as the anthropologist's salary. It certainly impacts hiring practices. Rankings have also reinforced the notion of 'publish or perish', meaning that, even in order to keep a job, academics sometimes have to publish a certain number of high-ranking publications per year, for if not, their careers may be in jeopardy. In spite of these measures, the politics of academic publishing remain elusive as criteria keep changing, not least because what one cohort of anthropologists was trained for is bound to be different once they are exposed to assessment. There is a debate over the extent to which the quality of academic writing is and should be tailored to research assessments and evaluation formats, and what the intellectual consequences of this might be (Strathern 2000).

Anthropological writing is increasingly influenced by these managerial trends. In our discipline, journal articles continue to be important, but there is an enduring notion that long-term fieldwork can best be justified in the space of a full-length monograph. While a number of substantial journal articles might work almost as well, it may be more cumbersome to find those articles rather than reading a book where the material and analysis are all in one place. As books, edited volumes, and book chapters are less prominent in the natural sciences and thus on the ranking lists, they become less prestigious on the citation indices where anthropology is included. Moreover, the amount of work it takes to write a monograph is not rewarded, as it is often treated as just another 'item'. What is more, appreciative references are not distinguished in the citation indices from negative ones.¹⁴ Anthropology, in so far as it is a critical science, can also not be captured by numerical [metrics](#) (Stein 2018). The logic of such ranking lists is not in accordance either with how certain edited volumes or at least notable introductions to volumes that were published before citation indices were set up keep having a major influence on anthropology. This aspect is obviously not indicated in citation indices or as impact factors, as they only take account of recent work that is available online. Fredrik Barth's introduction to his edited *Ethnic groups and boundaries* (1969) is a case in point as it keeps being a standard reference in anthropology (see also Appadurai 1986) but was published too early to be included in indices. As to the fate of books, printed or electronic, fiction or nonfiction, John Thompson, in his sociological research of the publishing business, predicts that as long as it is attractive enough to readers, the book will 'continue to play an important role as a means of expression and communication in our cultural and public life for the foreseeable future' (2011: 399-400).

Writing anthropology in relation to literature

Though anthropology's literary mode is nothing new, the 'writing culture' debate intensified the presence of literature in anthropology, which has been identified in terms of a 'literary turn' because of literature's impact on anthropological writing (Scholte 1987). This was in line with the growing awareness of the

writing process. As a part of the move away from the detached textual style, as well as when it came to narrative structure, anthropologists took inspiration from fiction. Geertz (1988) even identified the ‘anthropologist as author’.¹⁴ An anthropology of writing and writers emerged. Local literary work from a field was read as [ethnography](#) and might be included in anthropological accounts. With his background as a student of literature at University College London, Victor Turner later connected African ritual and Western literature as ‘mutually elucidating’ (1976: 77-8). Jane Austen was identified by Richard Handler and Daniel Segal (1990) as an ethnographer of marriage, kinship, and class in early eighteenth century England. In the 1990s, Nigel Rapport (1994) organised his fieldwork in the village of Wanet in England in relation to the writer E.M. Forster as an imagined fellow fieldworker. Rapport’s technique was to ‘zigzag’ between the work of Forster and his own field experience. A similar way of combining anthropology and literature, of writing anthropology together with a literary companion, is Kirin Narayan’s *Alive in the writing* (2012). Narayan juxtaposes her experience of ethnographic writing with that of Anton Chekhov, the renowned playwright and short story writer, as he researched and wrote about Sakhalin Island, the Russian penal colony. Recognising Chekhov as her ethnographic muse releases Narayan’s writing creativity. Inspired by Chekhov’s letter about his journey to Sakhalin, his reflections on his research, and writing process, Narayan feels an affinity with him as she finds topics and texts to include in her book. Incidentally, Chekhov’s work on Sakhalin is nonfiction, and as Narayan gets to know his literary *oeuvre*, she learns that he is a literary writer with an ethnographic sensibility.¹⁵ Included in *Alive in the writing*, at the end of the chapters, are writing exercises, and the book concludes with a postscript with advice for different stages of the writing process, ranging from getting started and moving forward to moving past writer’s block, and revising and finishing. In response to the upsurge of non-academic writing workshops and university programs in creative writing in Euro-America during the last decades, there is a plethora of writing manuals, also by fiction writers (cf. Wulff 2017). The daughter of Alfred Kroeber, and his writer-wife Theodora, Ursula Le Guin (2015: ix, xiii, xii) was not an anthropologist herself, but there are anthropological aspects in her fiction, referred to as science fiction or fantasy. Anthropologists appear in her writings, and the ‘other worlds’ she imagined resonate with an anthropological endeavour to study very different ways of living. Le Guin also wrote a ‘handbook for storytellers - writers of narrative prose’ to go with the writing workshops she taught. Her declaration that her ‘book is not for beginners’ attests to an awareness that writing is a skill that is never fully learnt, but ideally one to keep developing. Observing that some people have a gift for writing, she points out that writing is a skill to be learnt and mastered even for those who are gifted (cf. Wulff 2018). Le Guin emphasises that reading one’s own work also requires training. This would be what Brian Moeran refers to as ‘self-editing’, the process of making choices about style, grammar, organization, and of what to include and exclude (2016: 60-5). ‘Editing’, Moeran goes on, ‘is not writing but rewriting’ and this entails being ‘tough with yourself’ (2016: 60-5). Before submitting a text to an editor at a publishing house, Moeran’s advice is to get a sympathetic colleague’s stern comments

on it.

Writing about connections between anthropology, ethnographic writing, and literature, Caroline Brettell observes that:

The experiments with forms of ethnographic writing that might enliven the ethnographic text represent just one dimension of the way in which anthropology has engaged with literature...Some anthropologists have drawn directly on works of literature as inspiration; others have subjected these literary works to an anthropological analytical and theoretical lens (2015: 73).

Yet others, she goes on to say, 'have found the ethnographer or the autoethnographer in the novelist'. Anthropological interest in literary production certainly exists, such as in the ethnographic study of writing as craft and career in Ireland. Taking the question 'How come the Irish are such great writers?' as a point of departure, I have argued that this goes back to the oral storytelling tradition in Ireland, and a culture that cultivates this practice at social gatherings, also by teaching it to younger generations. Then, there is extensive training in creative writing at schools, as well as writing competitions, and an abundance of writing workshops for adults at literary festivals and other literary events. All this fosters a habit and an urge to write (Wulff 2017: ix). Ethnographies of writing are not limited to textual analysis. They can be based on live literature events and public readings of fiction at literary festivals. Drawing on a study of one of the major literary festivals in the UK called the Hay Festival and the small Polari Salon, an LGBT literary festival at the South Bank Centre in London, Ellen Wiles conveys the value of experiential literary ethnography not only to the academic world, but also to [arts](#) practitioners, curators, and producers (2021). It was through participant observation at literary festivals that Wiles learnt that, even in our [digitalising](#) world, such live events draw big audiences, not least because they provide appreciated opportunities for face-to-face connections between authors and readers.

Another take on how literature can relate to ethnography is the conceptualisation of fiction as a written text along with songs, poetry, essays, drama, and even newspapers and letters that are produced in a society under study (Archetti 1994a). This can reveal, on one level, interpersonal relationships and, on another level, cultural and social contexts such as [history](#) and the nation. It has been suggested that there are three types of fiction: 'The realistic historical novel that attempts to "reconstruct" a given period in a given society; the totally imagined story set in a historical period; and the essays devoted to an interpretation of a nation, its characteristics and creed'. In addition, 'some kind of historical and sociological knowledge is important in fiction', which makes it similar to writing anthropology. In line with much anthropology, in this volume fiction is treated as 'ethnographic raw material, not . . . authoritative statements about, or interpretations of, a particular society' (Archetti 1994b: 16-17).

Many anthropologists have expressed a sense of being confined by the rigidity of the academic style, which

has led them to seek refuge in fiction writing. This has been a way to complement what has been found to be unsatisfactory with producing dissertations or other academic writing (Stankiewicz 2012). Reflecting on fiction versus anthropology, there is a common notion that ‘anthropology is unique in its specification of dimensions for comparison and its standards for ethnographic descriptions. Are such dimensions and standards straitjackets? If one thinks so, one might turn to fiction for consolation’ (Eriksen 1994: 192; see also Narayan 1999). This advice seems to be both about reading fiction, also from one’s field, and writing fiction by drawing on fieldwork, such as *In an antique land* (Ghosh 1992). It turns out that ethnographic novels abound. They were (and are) written by authors who were trained in anthropology, and in some cases pursued an academic career while others went into writing fiction full time. An early ethnographic novel is *The delight makers* (Bandelier 1890), making use of many years of fieldwork with Pueblo Indians. *Their eyes were watching God* (Hurston 1937) also has an anthropological perspective. In 1954, the bestseller *Return to laughter* was published by Laura Bohannon under the pseudonym Elenore Smith Bowen. This is a fictionalised story about Bohannon’s fieldwork in Africa, including aspects of [tribal](#) life such as the impact of witchcraft. The novel has been widely read not only by students and scholars, but also by a general audience. It is a testimony to the efficacy of conveying anthropological insights through fiction. It is common that social scientists and anthropologists, including those who drive their disciplines, appreciate fiction writers’ ‘capacity to depict the real and unveil truths’ (Fassin 2014: 52). It is even the case that ‘distinguished anthropologists and sociologists have admitted that they find, in the works of these authors, more compelling, more accurate, and more profound accounts of the social worlds they explore than in those proposed by the scholars who study them’ (Fassin 2014: 52; see also McLean 2017). In this spirit, a new brand of ethnographic writing has emerged, one that experiments with various literary styles, not just as embellishment, but also as a way of writing anthropology through creative writing and thereby conveying otherwise un conveyable truths. The volume *Crumpled paper boat* (Pandian & McLean 2017: 1-2), for example, is composed of ethnographic writing in the form of poetry, fiction, memoir, and scriptwriting, among others. The title is a line from a poem by Arthur Rimbaud and refers in the volume to ethnographic writing as a journey, ‘a transformative passage’ indicated by ‘a little lost boat’ and ‘the frustrations that lead writers to crumple and scrap the slips of paper on which they work’ until their texts will ‘float... to unforeseeable destinations’ (Pandian & McLean 2017: 1-2). Here, writing is about transformations of the author and saying the unsayable, rather merely conveying what social life is like.

Anthropological writing genres

It is obvious that academic scholarly writing is the major genre for anthropologists, and that it is supported by the art of writing field notes (Sanjek 1990, 2015; Andersen *et al.* 2020). Still, anthropologists do much writing in other genres, not only literary fiction, as discussed above, but also poetry (Rosaldo 2013, among many others). An anthropological career inevitably includes writing academic administrative texts such as a variety of reports and evaluations, but also writing grant proposals, yet another genre (Brenneis

2009; Finnström 2016). Contrary to many fiction writers, anthropologists tend to learn a certain writing style marked by academic strictness and cues such as aim, argument, engagement with debates and/or earlier research, theory, [ethnography](#), method, conclusions, and bibliography. Anthropologists then tend to keep that style, rather than developing in new directions. Some of them, though, see an opportunity for changing track and tone as they move on to new research topics. Others switch between different genres, bringing back stylistic features from creative nonfiction, memoir, autoethnography, travel writing, journalism, and even fiction, poetry, and crime novel writing to their academic writing (Wulff 2016; Barton & Papen 2010).

Creative nonfiction, which tells stories about real events with fiction techniques, has been especially popular among anthropologists in the United States. This genre can be understood as ‘making the reading experience vivid, emotionally compelling, and enjoyable while sticking to the facts’ (Cheney 2001: 2). Originating in the 1960s New Journalism, this writing genre is often connected with the highly successful *In cold blood* (Capote 1965), a true crime story about the murder of a family on a [farm](#) in Kansas in the United States. The book builds on interviews with local people and police investigators, newspaper articles, and observation of the court case. Creative nonfiction has, since it was formulated, ‘gained momentum in subsequent years to inform assorted kinds of writing’ (Narayan 2007a: 130). The movement has come to include a variety of genres and is now established through ‘courses, grants, writing degree tracks, and journals’ (Narayan 2007a: 130). So what can ethnographers learn from creative nonfiction? One point is to strike a balance of writing about social life in an absorbing way without making things up. Another is to think of how to include and deal with situation, story, character, scenes, summaries, and so called ‘expository lumps’ (i.e. dense and heavy background information) when writing up their work (Narayan 2007a: 136-139). The advice to deal with the latter is to ‘break it up, spread it out, slip it into conversation’ (Le Guin 1998: 114).

Following up on writing anthropology in relation to literature, and in different genres, finding publishing outlets for work that is not strictly academic may be an issue. Yet some specialised journals for this exist, such as *Anthropology & Humanism*, the journal of the Society for Humanistic Anthropology, which publishes traditional academic articles as well as other anthropological writing genres: poetry, short fiction, and creative nonfiction essays in every issue.⁴⁴ These essays often take ethnographic or personal experiences as points of departure and move into more or less imagined realms. *The vulnerable observer* (Behar 1996), for example, is the story of how a Cuban-American anthropologist was away doing fieldwork on funeral practices in Spain, when her own grandfather died back in Miami. This experience made her argue for the emotional, subjective nature of fieldwork: the ethnographer cannot be detached, nor fully objective, in relation to their field. Spanning different genres, this book is also a kind of memoir, which has itself become a substantial genre in anthropology, primarily recalling events from the field but often going back to the personal life of the anthropologist (Jackson 2006; Narayan 2007b; Stoller 2008; Collins &

Gallinat 2010). While memoirs can be expected to be written by older people who have lived long and eventful lives, it turns out that many anthropological memoirs are composed by writers who are still relatively young, or at least middle aged in their 40s or 50s, such as *The power of the between* (Stoller 2008: 4), triggered by the turmoil of a cancer diagnosis, which entailed a space 'in-between' life and [death](#).

My father's wars (Waterston 2014) is a daughter's account about her father's fate as told to her mainly by him, but also by her mother. This was a life course that was driven by dramatic [historical](#) events: Alisse Waterston's father had to flee the Holocaust in Poland with his family to Cuba. Eventually he joins the US Army, meets and marries an American woman, and finds himself commuting between Havana and New York, until Castro's [revolution](#) forces the family to leave Cuba for Puerto Rico. This memoir exemplifies how an eventful personal story defined by dangers can convey major political events. Another kind of memoir is *My life as a spy* (Verdery 2018). When the secret police files in Eastern Europe became available after 1989, Katherine Verdery, an American anthropologist who had spent frequent long research stints studying political economy of social inequality, ethnic [relations](#), and nationalism in communist Romania, discovered in her file that she had been [surveilled](#) by the secret police, the Securitate, and accused of being a spy. In this case, the memoir was a way to correct and contextualise a faulty local image of an anthropologist. At the same time, it is an important piece of information about how Romania operated during communism.

Travel writing is yet another form of memoir, as heralded in the classic *Tristes tropiques* (Lévi-Strauss 1992 [1955]) which documents travels and fieldwork in Brazil. Its proximity to travel writing was later problematised, when travel accounts about the [colonies](#) were critiqued for conveying a Western imperial perspective (Pratt 1992). Even though early travel writing relied too much on exoticisation, this is now changing (Nygqvist 2018). Yet travel writing continues to be a way to explore the world on behalf of people 'at home', to tell them about places elsewhere, often far away, thereby mediating the world. In addition to describing places and people, as well as the travel itself, travel writing also tends to address the conditions of travel.

Related to anthropological memoir as a genre is the notion of 'autoethnography', defined as 'referring either to the ethnography of one's own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest' – indeed, the two types can be related (Reed-Danahay 1997: 2). An autoethnography of borders is *'Illegal' traveller*, which combines fieldwork on undocumented immigrants with descriptions of the personal experience of having to flee Iran during dangerous circumstances. The preface, dated 1987, begins:

One cold night in late February, in a barren land surrounded by huge rugged mountains, I stood on a gravel road, like any other road in this rural area. Midnight passed; the whole landscape was wrapped in silence. The road separated Iran from Afghanistan. It was the border. Shrouded in a deadly stillness was the road, one of the most sanguinary roads in the world laid in wait for its next prey. It was a moonless night. "Good! The darkness shelters us," said my smuggler... "If I take this step, I will be an 'illegal' person and the world

will never be the same again.” That night I took that step and my odyssey of “illegality” began (Khosravi 2010: ix).

There are, again, overlaps between memoirs and autoethnography, yet an anthropological autoethnography is usually distinguished by an explicit and systematic theoretical structure which is intended to explain how a personal story that acknowledges power and inequality has a general ethnographic interest. This has been referred to as critical autoethnography (Reed-Danahay 2019). The experiences in the quote above, and subsequent ones about what it is like to be a refugee in Stockholm, also go into opinion pieces for newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* (Khosravi 2020). Contrary to writing anthropology, writing journalism always requires an accessible style, short sentences, and a key point introduced early in the text. If anthropological ideas are used, they have to be explained to a general audience. More often than not, journalistic articles connect to an urgent event in the news. They tend to be much shorter and limited in scope than most academic ones. In addition, editors often decide on the headline, which is drastically different from what academics are used to. Again, the boundaries with anthropological writing are blurred, as some anthropologists who keep writing influential journalistic comments on current affairs become public intellectuals, thereby potentially enhancing their academic reputation. This is at times called public anthropology, considered by many to be crucial for an understanding of public life but requiring a refinement of the art of narrative as well as a relinquishing of dry analysis (Eriksen 2005). Moreover, anthropologists who write journalism can be seen to bring back stylistic traits such as lucidity to their anthropological writing. Journalism in anthropology is – as is so often the case – a twofold topic, comprising both anthropologists writing journalism, and the anthropological study of worlds of journalism and journalistic writing (Boyer 2005, 2013; Hannerz 2004; Boyer & Hannerz 2006). *Writing future worlds* (Hannerz 2016) investigates the new genre of speculative future scenarios, such as the idea of ‘the clash of civilizations’, having impact on global debate and understandings. As to ethnographies of journalism, there is, for instance, a study of former East German journalists and their attempts at explaining life in post-unification Germany which raises complicated issues about the nation and modernity (Boyer 2005). Still in Germany, another study focuses on news organizations, and how [digital](#) information and communication technologies have transformed how journalists work there (as elsewhere): they find themselves in a quickly changing landscape where social media is a major actor and contributes to the fact that their authority, expertise, and skills are challenged (Boyer 2013). More in line with travel writers, foreign correspondents, in a study conducted mainly in Jerusalem, Tokyo, and Johannesburg, report from one part of the world to another. It turns out that unique story lines emerge in different correspondent ‘beats’, yet what they write is also shaped by their home country and personal interest. One insight of this study is that both anthropologists and foreign correspondents have a lot to learn from each other when it comes to illuminating the general public about events and peoples in faraway places (Hannerz 2004).

The frequent blurring of writing genres has attracted a lot of attention. In fact ‘there has been an enormous amount of genre mixing in social science, as in intellectual life generally, and such blurring of kinds is continuing apace’ (Geertz 1980: 1659). One type of genre mixing is the monograph *Lost in transition* (Ghodsee 2011), on the downfall of communism in Bulgaria, where ethnographic chapters take turns with chapters written as ethnographic fiction. More often, genre mixing in anthropology takes the form of single texts, identified as combinations of ethnography and creative nonfiction, memoir and opinion pieces. Genre mixing has been pivotal for anthropology’s development both intellectually and methodologically. It fosters creativity, and suggests a language to approximate saying the unsayable as well as generating new approaches and ideas for research, even if that is often overlooked on academic ranking lists and citation indices.

Conclusions and looking ahead

As a discipline, anthropology builds on academic writing. Yet a focus on the craft of writing is relatively recent in the discipline’s [history](#). Anthropologists continue to accentuate their identity as writers, drawing on literature, as well as different anthropological writing genres such as creative nonfiction, memoir, autoethnography, travel writing, and journalism. Our on-going sharpening of writing as a skill improves the knowledge that we are able to produce and convey, sometimes even providing more accurate accounts of social life than conventional academic work. Collaborative writing has increased both with the people we study, as an attempt to empower them and to draw on their expertise, and with colleagues from other disciplines, partly in response to requests from research funding agencies. There is also a growing interest in working with visual [artists](#), especially graphic artists, as exemplified by *Light in dark times* (Waterston & Hollands 2020). Publication formats have equally become more flexible: featuring small books, essays on current affairs, and conversations in journals among many other types of outlets. The rise of digital publishing increases this flexibility, as anthropological discussions are now had on Twitter, and blogs such as AnthroDendum.¹⁴ There is an upswing in honest accounts of how anthropological texts are actually composed that describe the role of personal creativity, academic training, and biography in the way arguments are formulated, as well as the impact of writing routines. They combine writing with a personal touch in combination with a scholarly responsibility, while calling for accessible styles (Nielsen & Rapport 2018; McGranahan 2020). With more diversity in anthropological writing styles, formats, and outlets in the future, questions of how to assess quality will be even more accentuated and debated. Importantly, there is a quickly-expanding realization that writing can and should be a driving force in the process of [decolonising](#) anthropology (Pandian 2017; Ulysse 2020; Tapsell 2020), indicating that this is a defining moment for reconsidering writing styles.

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[1] Tichenor, M. 2020. Metrics. In *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (eds) F. Stein, S. Lazar, M. Candea, H. Diemberger, J. Robbins, A. Sanchez & R. Stasch (available on-line: <http://doi.org/10.29164/20metrics>).

[2] Clifford Geertz (1988) considered especially Bronislaw Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, and Claude Lévi-Strauss as authors.

[3] A number of volumes combine anthropology with literature such as Dennis & Aycock 1989, Benson 1993, Daniel & Peck 1996, De Angelis 2002, and Cohen 2013.

[4] The Society for Humanistic Anthropology is a section of the American Anthropological Association. See also the online magazine, *Otherwise* (<https://www.otherwisemag.com/>).

[5] <https://anthrodendum.org/>