

# Anthropology at the Edge of Words: Where Poetry and Ethnography Meet

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**SUMMARY** *Anthropology has seen major challenges regarding methods, epistemologies, and how one writes ethnographically. As practicing ethnographers and poets, we focus on one among many vibrant new styles of anthropological scholarship: ethnographic poetry. As poetry appears more regularly in scholarly venues, anthropologists may wonder how to create ethnographic poetry and toward what end. To address this, we begin with definitions of ethnographic poetry in relation to ethnography and ethnopoetics. We then consider how poetry may help anthropologists to write insightfully about how we and other people live. Drawing on our own poetry, and that of others, we explore how form affects meaning and ethnographic insight. [Keywords: ethnographic poetry, epistemology of ethnography, poetic anthropology, literary turn in ethnography, representation]*

[Poetry] can say in words more than words can say.

—Marvin Bell

Over the past several decades we have seen major challenges in anthropology regarding the methods and underlying epistemologies by which we study culture.<sup>1</sup> Here, we focus on one question often raised by skeptics: how can we know as readers that what ethnographers say is really true? Or, consider an even stronger (and declarative) indictment: what ethnographers say can't possibly be true. As many critics have argued, our unease or incredulity as readers has been magnified by the disingenuous literary techniques of positivist prose (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986; Tyler 1987). Passive voice or declarative sentences, third-person constructions, and jargon as a talisman of authority, invocations of the royal "we" or "they"—all abet magisterial, suspect approaches to authenticity. How we write in anthropology has become as much a part of methodological reflection as the cultural subjects about whom we write (Clifford 1986:2).

Many have sounded the alarm bell—with either dismay or relief—warning of the crisis in ethnography, some even trumpeting its demise, or at least its transformation into something utterly new (cf. Tyler 1987). With the poststructural and postmodern turns, two key premises have been pulled out from

under us, what Norman Denzin refers to as the twin crises of representation and legitimacy. We can no longer assume that the ethnographer can “directly capture lived experience” (1997:3). We do not represent ethnographic reality; we create it in our texts. Trinh sums up the emperor’s lack of clothes: “[t]he anthropologist . . . does not find things; s/he makes them. And makes them up” (1989:141).

Yet, even if we were able to “capture” realities—or, at least reach a worthy approximation,<sup>2</sup> as we would argue—what criteria could we legitimately use to evaluate or interpret ethnographic texts? We want to know the world, but how do we go about it? We have become like Adrie Kusserow—anthropologist and poet—who writes in the poem, “Thirty-One, Anthropologist, No Gods Left,”

If meaning has shape,  
then I am searching for a bowl of it  
[. . . .]  
I don’t know anything anymore  
except this:  
If Knowledge came to me  
in the thickest part of the night,  
woke me with a flashlight,  
asked me, *What do you know?*  
I would say, nothing, nothing at all,  
except diving, and loving this world. [2002:50]

Since the 1990s, experimental approaches to ethnography have proliferated, with no one form claiming a new orthodoxy; these days we might see ethnographic novels, memoirs, biographies, or a pastiche of multiple forms (e.g., Behar 1993, 1996, 2008; Gottlieb and Graham 1994; Jackson 1986; Niriyān 1995, 2007; Stoller 1989, 1997, 1999).

As practicing ethnographers and poets ourselves, we focus on only one of the many exuberant new styles of anthropological inquiry: ethnographic poetry. Since the mid-1980s, anthropology has become much more open to both literary theory and literary forms; and ethnographic poetry has become a more accepted (although far from mainstream) mode of representation in anthropology (cf. Daniel and Peck 1996; Diamond 1986; Maynard 2001b; Tarn 2007; Tedlock and Mannheim 1995); this is equally true for related social science fields (Cahnmann 2003, 2006b; Cahnmann-Taylor 2008; Prendergast et al. 2009; Richardson 1997). As one measure, the Society for Humanistic Anthropology routinely publishes ethnographic poetry and fiction in this journal, and for many years has sponsored an annual poetry and fiction prize; indeed, we are cojudges (along with Dorine Jennette) of the poetry contest. *The Journal of Latinos and Education, Language Arts, Qualitative Inquiry*, and other journals of educational and methodological scholarship regularly feature poetry along with empirical and theoretical work. Likewise, the *Bellevue Literary Review*, published by the Department of Medicine at New York University, showcases creative writing that “touch[es] upon relationships to the human body, illness, health and healing” (*Bellevue Literary Review* n.d.).

As poetry appears more regularly in scholarly venues alongside ethnographic prose, many anthropologists may be left wondering how poetry contributes to the field, and how to approach writing ethnographic poetry

themselves. To address these questions, we begin with definitions of *ethnographic poetry* in relation to ethnography and ethnopoetics. We then consider how poetry may help anthropologists to write more insightfully about how we and other people live. We draw on examples from our own poetry and that of others to explore how form may affect meaning and ethnographic insight. We conclude with some advice for aspiring ethnographic poets, emphasizing possibilities as well as cautions.

### On Ethnography, Poetic Ethnography, Ethnographic Poetry, and Ethnopoetics

Our image of classic ethnography typically features an anthropologist spending extended time in another society, documenting local actions and thought, accounting for patterns in human behavior. Renato Rosaldo (1989) is one of many postcolonial and experimental anthropologists who express growing unease with defining ethnography as a monolithic genre that focuses only on “cultural patterns.” Rosaldo argues that classic ethnography (prior to the 1970s)

emphasizes shared patterns at the expense of processes of change and internal inconsistencies, conflicts, and contradictions. By defining culture as a set of shared meanings, classic norms of analysis make it difficult to study zones of difference within and between cultures. From the classic perspective, cultural borderlands appear to be annoying exceptions rather than central areas for inquiry. [Rosaldo 1989:29]

With the post-modern critique of ethnography, classic terms such as “pattern” or “structure” have given way to “disjunctive” nouns like *pastiche* or *mélange* (cf. Maynard 2002, 2003, 2008). More recent, experimental anthropologists prefer more fragmented ethnographic encounters amid “cultural borderlands” (Rosaldo 1989:48–49). This shift in ethnography is similar to the earlier poetic movement often thought to originate with Walt Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*—first published in 1885 (1998)—which moved American poetry decisively away from strictly closed forms (e.g., the sonnet, sestina, villanelle, etc.) to more free and open verse (Maynard 2002). So, too, the rigid orthodoxies of classic ethnography are breaking down in the face of experimental writing across genres. Anthropologists working in more innovative modes engage in powerful and contentious dialogue about the relation of cultural reality to ethnographic expression.

Much of this more experimental writing remains prose, or largely prose, but seeks explicitly to write poetically with an ear cocked toward language, the medium as an aspect of truth telling (e.g., Desjarlais 1997; Meyerhoff 1980). But within the context of this creative and post-modern turn, we see ethnographic poetry emerging as well, drawing attention to cultural borderlands between poetry and prose, as well as between scholarship and art.

Although somewhat related, ethnographic poetry is not to be confused with ethnopoetics. Coined by poet-ethnographer Jerome Rothenberg in 1968 (Brady 2003), ethnopoetics focused on the aesthetic principles of indigenous oral poetry (and how these might differ from those in Western literary traditions), as

well as the translation of oral poetics (cf. Hymes 1981, 2003; Rothenberg 1985; Tedlock 1985). Not surprisingly, many anthropologists who have studied ethnopoetics—but others as well—have also written poetry or, more to the point, *ethnographic poetry*, verse written by researchers based on “field” study. Ethnographic poets include Stanley Diamond (1986), Paul Friedrich (2006), Dell Hymes (1993), Michael Jackson (1989), Nathaniel Tarn (1986, 2002, 2007), Tarn and Prechtel (1997), Adrie Kusserow (2002, 2007), Ivan Brady (1991, 2003), Renato Rosaldo (2001, 2006), and Nomi Stone (2008), among others.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, often in the past—although certainly not always—anthropologists kept their poetry discreet, and wrote poems seemingly unrelated to their ethnographic fieldwork. One of the first female anthropologists, Ruth Benedict, whose book, *Patterns of Culture* (1934) introduced the public early on to cultural diversity, published her poetry under pseudonyms to keep it hidden from her mentor, Franz Boas, and other academic colleagues (Behar 2008).<sup>4</sup> To mention poetry in academic study once risked the impression that one’s research was less a work of scholarship than a fictive invention (Cahnmann-Taylor 2008). Although this may still hold true in some scholarly circles, ethnographic poetry is becoming increasingly a visible and viable form for trying to achieve and convey cultural understanding.

Researchers practicing more lyrical forms of prose, analyzing (and translating) indigenous oral poetry, or stretching their own skills as poets—these define the continuum from poetic ethnography, ethnopoetics to ethnographic poetry. Our own endeavors concern the first and last categories, where ethnography meets poetry on the page, infusing anthropological scholarship with the spirit of creative connection. To wit: what should our ethnographic narratives look like? How might creative writing genres, such as poetry, recast the legitimacy and truth telling of anthropological research? What questions does ethnographic poetry raise concerning ethnographic training, validity and aesthetic quality and qualification?

### **Writing Poetic and Ethnographic Truths**

While we certainly have not given up on the potential value of ethnographic prose, we believe ethnographic poetry can provide important insights, summing up for both insiders and outsiders alike the (dare we say) “essential” gist of our most dearly held, often tacit cultural assumptions (cf. Maynard 2008). Likewise, anthropology can learn from poetry to both expand the multiple ways in which we represent those with whom we work and to help us to be more attentive to how affect as well as form can convey meaning.

How are the genres in which we write capable of speaking to what we seldom say aloud, fundamental cultural principles, values, premises we simply assume to be essential? Certainly, contemporary American poetry comes replete with claims to what Sue Ellen Thompson (1997) calls “Writing the Unspeakable.” For Thompson, the best poetry tries to express the inexpressible, and does it well. Or, as the poet Marvin Bell simply says, “poetry . . . can say in words more than words can say” (1997:45). Charles Simic sums it up: *Wonderful Words, Silent Truth* (1990). To be sure, modernist (and, esp., postmodernist) poetry in the United States—like much recent ethnography—is leery of being

too orderly, summing up too much. Cultural practices, the argument goes, are inherently messy, even, inchoate or incoherent; poetry and ethnography as well should avoid too much system or symmetry, the suspiciously neat tying off of bows, too much cant. As Maynard (2002) notes elsewhere, Philip Levine remarks, in the poem "Snails,"

I was about to say something final  
 that would capture the meaning  
 of autumn's arrival, something  
 suitable for bronzing,  
 something immediately recognizable  
 as so large a truth it's totally untrue,  
 when one small white cloud—not much  
 more than the merest fragment of mist—  
 passed between me and the pale  
 thin cuticle of the mid-day moon [. . . ]  
 I kept quiet. [1991:23]

Poets may be alienated by language, suspicious of it, yet again and again they test its limits to describe, in Paul Friedrich's (1996) phrase, its power to sum up. Friedrich (1996) makes a double case for poetry, not just ethnographic poetry: it provides important access into specific "cultures," and helps to give us words for the slippery concept of "culture" per se. Because a successful narrative or lyric poem can echo or resonate so powerfully with the emotional experience and sense of identity of cultural insiders, it allows us to see the nuances and complexities of culture. Yet poetry is also cultural in a second sense: its spare and oblique elegance. Like culture, poetry is allusive, not susceptible to the sort of old scientism in anthropology that viewed culture as a "how-to" manual of instructions. Poetry and culture brim with indirection, ambiguity, lacunae, indeed, with downright silence (Friedrich 1996:41; Maynard 2008).

What can anthropology learn from poetry informed by cultural study (poetry we will call "social realist" for its attention to the social world)? How might the practice and readership of ethnographic poetry help push ethnography further into exploring and illuminating cultural borderlands? We now turn to poetry and experimental ethnography that reveal how poetic ethnographers, as insiders or outsiders, position themselves in the study of cultural practices and relationships.

### Poetic Ethnography and Communities of Difference

Donna Deyhle shares a joke she learned when conducting her ethnographic study of education in the Navajo nation: Q: "How many people are there in a typical Navajo family? A: "A mother, father, two sons, two daughters and an *anthropologist*" (1998:39, emphasis added). Deyhle's lyrical prose articulates the many tensions she experienced as the "intruding anthropologist" (1998:42), one who became a trusted advocate, yet disrupted the lives of participants in her study, at times resulting unintentionally in emotionally and socially painful outcomes. She argues that, "researchers who do not acknowledge the effects of their presence . . . are not aware of the realities of the drama unfolding around them" (1998:47).

Poetry is one important place where ethnographers can explore tensions that emerge between the outside researcher and the community. By demanding swift associations and evocative language, poetic craft allows the anthropologist to name and claim subjectivities and contradictions experienced in “the field.” Like Deyhle, we too have experienced tensions in our ethnographic work—whether in Philadelphia or Cameroon—Cahnmann working with teachers and urban youth in U.S. bilingual schools, and Maynard with the Kedjom people in the Bamenda Grassfields.

In “Ghetto Teachers’ Apology” Cahnmann (2006a) uses slant-rhymed couplets to grapple with tensions between a teacher’s role as student advocate and the teacher as an outsider, detached from—and, therefore, potentially harmful to—the community she serves.

### *Ghetto Teachers’ Apology*

I’m afraid, sweet Wilmarie, we’ve lied.  
 We didn’t teach you how to hide  
 your Rite Aid salary from Wel-  
 fare in a Dominican bank. We didn’t tell  
 you how to find a roommate or put a lock  
 on your bedroom door or how to walk  
 after sundown by yourself, how to slouch  
 at your brother’s funeral, patched  
 bullet holes in an open casket in your living room.  
 We never told you,  
 like your boss, you can’t speak English,  
 or like your cousin, you can’t speak Spanish.  
 We didn’t tell you how to live on  
 \$5.50 an hour or that at seven-  
 teen you’d be an orphan. We didn’t want to sour  
 our hopes and fictions, we wanted you to flower,  
 and prove us wrong. Sweet Wilmarie,  
 we’re sorry.  
 We didn’t live on your side of town  
 between crack houses and crackdowns.  
 We’re not like you, we didn’t know how to survive  
 behind shatter proof glass with those pretty brown eyes. [2006a]

If ethnography, as Debhora Battaglia has said, is “a technique of knowledge production [that] generate[s] productive uncertainties and disjunctive possibilities” (1999:114), then ethnographic poetry is well suited to explore feelings of doubt and displacement that emerge when conducting a cultural study with a community that is different—and at times more socioeconomically marginal—than one’s own. “[L]ied/hide; Wel-/tell; lock/walk; slouch/patched,” coupled together, Cahnmann uses the poem’s form to reinforce feelings of connection and disconnection between the speaker, a well-meaning educator, and the gritty, lived realities of her student addressee. Similarly, Maynard’s poem, “Newborn,” considers insider-outsider tensions when the male speaker is present at a rite conducted solely by women (2001a).

*Newborn*

Women gather in a kitchen burnished black  
 from thirty years of smoke and drying corn.  
 Toothbrushes still stuck in their mouths,  
 co-wives stretch and yawn. I'm the one man sitting here  
 on sufferance, watching women do women's work;  
 my wife knows these wives. It's barely dawn/ . . . .

American poetry—at least since Walt Whitman wrote “I sing the body electric”—has been free (as have the social sciences with post-positivism) to “re-center the subject.” If classic positivist anthropology hid the ethnographer, like the elephant in the living room, we think it far more productive to acknowledge our presence. How else can we create “uncertainties and disjunctive possibilities,” explore feelings of displacement and doubt, if we do not hear the voice of the ethnographer? In Maynard’s poem, how else can we know that his very presence in the kitchen was odd that morning, perhaps invasive? Yet, without the ethnographer’s intrusion, we fail to learn more about other societies (or our own), or about the borderlands between Kedjom cultural practices and particular individuals. These points of tension are precisely the areas of inquiry where ethnographic poetry can direct our attention.

**Poetic Ethnography and Communities of Sameness**

Again, however, we caution against seeing ethnographic poetry as necessarily more insightful, more privileged, than prose. As we noted above, classic ethnographic studies of the cultural “Other” have given way to a more experimental, even autoethnographic turn, of anthropologists studying their own communities of origin. Anthropologists can employ their artful science to make the familiar—strange. Ruth Behar (2008) has returned to her native Cuba to study Cuban Jews who remained after the revolution in 1959, when her own family left for the United States. Using photography, film, lyrical prose, and poetry, she took advantage of the metaphoric power of anthropology to be both a “passport” and a “shield.”

Even though I didn't want to turn my native land into a field site, anthropology became my passport; anthropology became my magic carpet. Only as an anthropologist could I return to Cuba two and three times a year to do ongoing research. Anthropology also became my shield. Nobody could criticize me for breaking with the Cuban exile position which held that no Cuban should set foot again in Cuba until Fidel Castro was gone. [2008:18]

Like poetic ethnographic prose, both free verse and more formal structures in poetry can offer a paradoxical freedom to be honest, more explicit, about one's observations and feelings, whether as an ethnographic outsider, or as a cultural insider who writes from outside oneself. Ethnographic poetry—when crafted within the rigors and opportunities offered by compressed and heightened language—requires the writer to revise and remove excess, highlighting emotions and attitudes, our stance, as well as ideas. Recall here Pound's dictum

that poetry is news that stays news: poetic description of a person or event must remain fresh and insightful long after the “news” of the original encounter took place (cf. Perloff 1990:51). Ethnographic poetry offers one means for anthropology to remain relevant, fresh, and “new” for years after our studies occurred.

What makes such news both new and news, what makes the bare bones of observation, compelling and insightful, is the audacious ethnographic risk of seeking insight, not just information. Take also the example of Natasha Trethewey (2006), a biracial poet who uses formal verse structures to document and bear witness to her “native south” in the southeastern United States. We excerpt the first two and last stanzas from Trethewey’s poem “Incident,” whose subject is a childhood encounter with Klansmen:<sup>5</sup>

We tell the story every year—  
 how we peered from the windows, shades drawn—  
 though nothing really happened,  
 the charred grass now green again.

We peered from the windows, shades drawn,  
 at the cross trussed like a Christmas tree,  
 the charred grass still green. Then  
 we darkened our rooms, lit the hurricane lamps.  
 . . . .

When they were done, the men left quietly. No one came.  
 Nothing really happened.  
 By morning all the flames had dimmed.  
 We tell the story every year. [2006]

Trethewey uses the *pentoum*—a Malaysian prosodic form borrowed by 19th-century European poets—cycling the second and fourth lines in one stanza, as the first and third in the next, to evoke a haunting memory of cross burning. The poem’s concluding stanza leaves the reader in at once the same and a startlingly new place from the opening lines: “Nothing really happened,” and “We tell the story every year.” Images of beauty are juxtaposed to the ugly: “cross trussed like a Christmas tree,” and “charred grass now green.” Another haunting juxtaposition appears in the third and fourth stanzas [not excerpted here]—men “white as angels,” who “darkened our rooms” and “trembled” the candlewicks.

Despite having done extensive research on black history in the Southern United States, Trethewey (2006) is a poet, not an anthropologist or social scientist of her own home. Yet we believe that “social realist” poets—whether they write formal poems, like Trethewey, or free verse like Philip Levine (1991) and Maggie Anderson (2000)—addressing cultural borderlands and tension through verse, have much to teach anthropologists about how poetry can illuminate and enhance our understanding of cultural and historical practices. As we noted above, we define *social realist poetry* loosely as poetry that is especially attentive to, and seeks to understand, the social world. In addition to Trethewey, Levine, and Anderson, we recommend that anthropologists read poets such as B. H. Fairchild (2005), Yusef Komunyakaa (1988), Ted Kooser (1994), or Adrienne Rich (1991), among many others (see additional resources in the Appendixes).

Other writers draw on several genres at once to reveal the social world. Writing “colonial anthropology in reverse,” Guillermo Gomez Peña merges

poetry with prose and performance art to explode the relationship between performer and audience, researcher and subject, scholar and artist. By posing in museum exhibits as “artificial savages,” “ethno-cyborgs,” and his most provocative “Mexterminator”—“a stylized anthropomorphization of Chicano postcolonial demons” (2000:132), Peña incites dialogue concerning the cultural positioning of Chicano identity in the United States.

An excerpt from a poem titled “Performance Memory: Tijuana, 1994,” uses humor and irony to explode the dialectic of intercultural violence and interracial desire central to projections of cultural otherness in the United States. The Spanish–English expressions remind the reader of T-shirt souvenirs that embody a speaker caught in the crossfire between codes of language as well as ethics:

I sit naked on a wheelchair  
wearing a NAFTA wrestling mask  
my chest is covered with *pintas*  
shit like:  
*“los chucos también aman”*  
*“me dicen el jalapeño pusher”*  
*“Aztlán es pura genitalia”*  
*“the bells are ringing in Baghdad”*  
*“greetings from Ocosingo”*  
*“too blessed to be stressed”*  
*“don’t worry, be Hopi”* [1994]

The poet Robert Bly argues that in many ancient works of art, a “floating leap” appears at the center, “a leap from the conscious to the unconscious and back again” (1975:1). Ethnographic poets like Peña, who refers to himself as a “reverse anthropologist,” are in touch with the leaping mind, open to fast associations that create new understandings about cultural borderlands. Ethnographic poetry alongside other experimental, creative forms, can help anthropologists paint a deeper portrait of social realities that might prove difficult through ethnographic prose.

Again, we do not wish to discard ethnographic prose for ethnographic poetry. Rather, we argue that the craft and practice of poetry offer many lessons for ethnography, as well as exciting potential hybridity between the two fields. We also believe there is a place where ethnographic poetry can resonate equally well with ethnographic prose. For example, in the poem “Driving through North Philly,” Cahnmann (2000, see also 2003) merged the voices of several African American and Latino students she interviewed into the voice of one black youth, illustrated in this excerpted stanza where one child explains why there are shoes hung over the electric wire:

For weeks I wonder until I stop  
to ask a kid from the neighborhood.  
We study each other: a black boy,  
backpack over left shoulder, pants big enough  
for two of him, and a white woman dressed like a teacher  
with notepad and loopy earrings. “Because it’s fun, Miss,”  
he says, as if the answer were scrawled on the wall

behind me in oversized bubble letters.  
And then, "So they remember you when you're gone."

Although it may have been written in graffiti everywhere, the teacher-researcher in this poem misses the obvious answer the child provides: "Because it's fun." The second answer, "So they remember you when you're gone," has the layered resonance of changing locations and death. The poem's concluding stanza illuminates a world view that is transformed through critically reflective inquiry.

"I done it lots a'times, Miss," he says with a grin.  
I consider how little I know about joy.  
What it's like to throw something up in the air  
that's important, that weighs something, that takes you places—  
and not wait for it to come down.

The anthropologist's tacit awareness gathers many lessons in "the field." Writing ethnographic notes as poetry, and/or poetic writing as data analysis, are ways to give language to these messages and share them in lyrical forms. Or, poems may occur as alternative notes or alongside published prose. Maynard (2002, 2004), for example, has published a chapbook of poems on the Kedjom, as well as a prose ethnography, *Making Kedjom Medicine*. It may be useful for readers to read prose on the social transformation of local medicine and the incursions of biomedicine, juxtaposed to a poem like "We Manage."

We've taken you to hospital in hopes  
there's something they can do.  
The stranger in the waiting room  
asks after your swollen, spongy lip—  
*What is it, Madame, how long  
has it stayed?* You respond  
with all the ardor of a conversation  
about the color of corn, the amount of rain  
in May. *Mommy!* declares the doctor,  
*if I cut into that, you go surely die.*  
Sleep today, there's no tomorrow.  
Behind your back he pronounces  
an angioma, the viperous nest  
of bloody vessels tying knots  
for no reason in your tongue and lips.  
The doctor's on a short fuse. We hear later  
he lost a patient, plagued by equipment  
that's too little and out-of-date. He slips  
into the sharp tones of North Dakota talk,  
saying he won't touch your lips  
with a five-foot pole, might as well  
stick his scalpel through your heart.  
Your eyes are wet and raw,  
a rarity in a place where adults don't cry.  
What's to say? There's no time  
to wait; you've got two sons  
and a daughter staying with a neighbor.  
Four o'clock and you have cocoyams to cook

for a husband playing finger harp  
 for school kids, begging Guinness  
 from family members half his age.  
 He's the eldest in the lineage; his juniors  
 only say, *we de manage*. Nothing to do  
 but drive home through the rainy-  
 season gate at the main market.  
 You gesture and hoot, laughing  
 at the *cris* woman standing in the road.  
 Waving us past, she's like some Chamba  
 commander, a warrior wheeling  
 on horseback, imperious to her troops. [2002]

### Challenges and Possibilities for Becoming an Ethnographic Poet

Poetry as ethnographic representation is doubly challenged: to be well-crafted, artful verse, and to attain validity in its research results. As we suggest, these are intimately related: methodological challenges in anthropology underscore the linkage between how we write ethnography, and the degree to which we can accept what it says as true. Still, aesthetic merit and ethnographic validity can be difficult to attain simultaneously. For ethnographic validity, "data" must be grounded in empirically "true" experiences that may conflict directly with the mantra of good poetry (at least in much of the West), that it is better to be "true" to our feelings and aesthetic excellence, than "true" to fact. Thus, a poet may not be loyal to historical locations, direct quotes, or chronology, to honor the values of writing a highly crafted, coherent, resonant poem, yet one equally or even more true to what is going on.

A poet may write more to what one does not yet know; an ethnographer (at least in the classic and positivist sense) writes more to what one already knows. The ethnographic poet and the poetic ethnographer must do both. That is, like the author of historical fiction, the ethnographic poet must try to be faithful to external historical experience, while reaching beyond or through it to an equally true, artful reality, a sense of aesthetics that enhances literal "facts" rather than diminishes them.

Attaining quality in both ethnography and poetry requires persistence, additional training, and validating criteria in both fields. If we want to write like poets—or, more accurately, if we want to write as well as good (even prominent) poets do—we need to learn and practice with them, and be willing to hold up our work to their scrutiny. Ethnographic poetry should not be judged by more forgiving criteria than poetry at large. The purposes of truth-telling ethnography are not served by writing inferior verse. Whether it is good or bad, poetry remains a cultural convention, just as ethnographic writing is; we do not escape that by begging off from the need to undergo training as poets on the grounds that we are really ethnographers. Historical novels are not held to a different standard aesthetically than novels. So, too with ethnographic poetry: whether published in *Paris Review* or *Anthropology and Humanism*, the poems must show evidence of the writer's maturity in lyrical decision-making.

As judges for the ethnographic poetry contest sponsored by the Society for Humanistic Anthropology, we have engaged colleagues in many discussions about whether to limit entry only to anthropologists. Some would argue for this

restriction on the grounds that the work of most anthropological poets would stand little chance of winning against the social realist poetry of poets at large. We believe, however, that ethnographic poetry must aspire and ascribe to the same high standards as poetry more widely.<sup>6</sup>

As ethnographic poetry continues to grow as a genre, more and more ethnographers will be reading and studying poetry and writing superior social realist poems of their own. Our own journeys have included training as ethnographers through our graduate degree programs and professional associations, as well as additional training as poets through workshop participation, attendance at local and national poetry events, and active writing and publications in both scholarly and literary venues (Cahnmann 2006b, 2006c; Maynard 2001b, 2002, 2003, 2008). Cahnmann finished a low-residency MFA program in poetry in 2007, a program that allows one to study poetry without relocating or changing professions; Maynard will complete a similar low-residency program in July 2010.<sup>7</sup>

So, how should aspiring ethnographic poets (who presumably already have training as ethnographers) begin? After all, the goal is not just to write poetry, or ethnographic poetry, but good ethnographic poetry. The advice we follow as ethnographers wishing to engage in ethnographic poetry has been to begin like a good anthropologist: immerse oneself in the culture of poetry. To understand a society, one learns its language, asks questions of those with community and cultural knowledge, and observes and participates to the extent possible. The same is true with poetry—one must take time to acquire the language of poetic craft, to ask questions of the masters—both living, working poets today, and those who have left behind their verse. One must become an active participant-observer: reading contemporary poetry, attending readings, and engaging in the rigorous practices of writing and re-visioning within the poetic community. Acquiring the tools of poetic craft, while aiming for cultural knowledge, provides the ethnographer with multiple genres to see the world truthfully, and, as Emily Dickinson advises, to “tell it slant” (1961).

In this way, we ethnographic poets will become aware of writers who approach culturally significant themes in their work with revelation and surprise. Social realist poets such as Julia Kasdorf (1992) on the Mennonite community, Daisy Fried (2006) for South Philadelphia teenagers, or William Heyen (2003) writing through voices of the Holocaust—these and other contemporary poets offer models for how we as aspiring ethnographic poets might approach our subject matter through verse.

Active engagement in reading and writing poetry enables ethnographic poets to bring discernment and sensual attention to their observations, it helps them to make surprising analytic leaps. Some scholars suggest a minimum of two years university study in poetry to write in this genre for publication (Piirto 2002). Publication in established poetry venues might also serve as validating criteria for publishing ethnographic verse.

We agree that aspiring ethnographic poets must do more than want to be a poet. They must also pursue sustained training and practice through formal or informal study, assessing the value of their verse in literary contexts such as poetry circles, workshops with established writers, and publishing in literary journals. Since 2006 we have offered a writers’ workshop and began a writers’

group at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, to engage in this process together with other creative ethnographic writers. Quality ethnographic poetry that passes muster in literary circles, we believe, will be regarded with greater value in anthropology and related scholarly fields. We look forward to the day when established ethnographic literary circles exist that cultivate the potential for great ethnopoetic verse.

To be sure, not all ethnographers have the time or inclination to pursue training in poetry. Yet the benefits of reading and writing poetry alongside prose are available for ethnographers who do not wish to write publishable verse. Critical of anthropologist Ruth Benedict's "cloying" poems published under pseudonyms, Ruth Behar (2008:63) advocates that anthropologists stick to genres they know well, enhancing their artistic quality through the medium of poetic ethnography: "After all, we have a lot of poetic poets out there, but tell me, how many poetic anthropologists do you know?" Not surprisingly, she poses a rhetorical challenge to anthropologists to add more poetry to their prose rather than pursue sloppy or sappy verse.

Again, and as we noted above, not all poems need to see the light of publication to help us discover ethnographic insights. Poetry is as useful to the process by which we observe and take notes ethnographically, as it may be as a finished product (esp. if the ethnographer is more novice at poetry). Poetic drafts may push forward how we remember or think about our experiences, or, ultimately, how we want to present and explain our material. Making both the material and message "strange"—whether in print or along the way—may help build toward a more rigorous analysis and theoretical understanding of what we observe.

To write poetic, ethnographic prose, anthropologists must accept the lyrical gifts poetry can provide to inspire improved data collection, analysis, and ethnographic prose publication. We reiterate that in order for ethnographic poetry to become truly accepted as a genre in anthropology, it must attain quality that is recognizable within literary circles outside of anthropology, as well as be useful in interpreting other ethnographic worlds. Ours are double criteria for excellence.

Ethnographic poets and poetic ethnographers seek to report (and understand) as accurately as we can what it means for a Kedjom woman to rise at 5:00 a.m. to cook and leave for the farms, or to be a Puerto Rican teenager in Philadelphia, caught between the languages of home and school. Poetry and poetic prose demand the use of all our senses and finely honed language and form to convey our experiences of other people and—even more audaciously—to explain why human beings think and act the way we do. How successful we are, depends on our capacity to write with honesty and reflection, an ability to experiment, as well as a profound sense of the lyric possibilities and rigors offered by poetry.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the International Symposium on Poetic Inquiry, October 26–28, 2007, Vancouver, B.C., Canada.

2. We do not accept more extreme versions of the postmodernist critique that risk throwing up their hands, saying no translation, no ethnography, is possible. Yet clearly

postmodernism can urge us toward crucial reflection about how we write about others and how we can say anything believable about the world. But, after all, there is an external world about which we need to write; and if we do not try to translate and interpret it, others (often more powerful) surely will (Maynard 2003).

3. We include ourselves here as ethnographic poets (Cahnmann 2003, 2006c; Maynard 2001b).

4. To be sure, much of Benedict's poetry was neither especially ethnographic nor particularly good (cf. Behar 2008).

5. Because gratis reprint permissions for full poems are challenging or impossible to acquire, we only reprint portions of this poem (and several other poems) so readers get an initial sense of how the formal structure works with the poem's content. We encourage readers to seek out the original poem in her book (Trethewey 2006) or through subscription to the following online journal <http://www.vqronline.org/articles/2004/spring/trethewey-incident/>.

6. We have reached a compromise position to charge a fee for ethnographic poets who are not members of the AAA.

7. We recognize that the cost and time of such study may be prohibitive for many social scientists. However, Cahnmann did find financial assistance from her home institution—the University of Georgia—which also supported her throughout the tenure process as a scholar and poet. Maynard received funding for an MFA through a Mellon Foundation award and his home institution, Denison University. Some social scientists may decide too quickly that support is nonexistent for their poetic excursions, or perhaps it exists in some institutions only as a result of more determined struggle. Whatever the situation, we encourage ethnographic poets to pursue support from their dissertation committees, employers, or other granting agencies.

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## Appendix I

### *Twenty Great Contemporary Poetry Books with Lessons for Anthropologists*

- Bly, Robert: *Eating the Honey of Words*  
 Campo, Rafael: *What the Body Told*  
 Derricotte, Toi: *Captivity*  
 Doty, Mark: *My Alexandria*  
 Eady, Cornelius: *Brutal Imaginations*  
 Fried, Daisy: *My Brother Is Getting Arrested Again*

Hahn, Kimiko: *The Artist's Daughter*  
 Hass, Robert: *Human Wishes*  
 Heyen, William: *Shoah Train*  
 Hicok, Bob: *Insomnia Diary*  
 Hoagland, Tony: *Donkey Gospel*  
 Howe, Marie: *The Good Thief*  
 Kumin, Maxine: *Selected Poems: 1960–1990*  
 Laux, Dorianne: *What We Carry*  
 Lux, Thomas: *New and Selected Poems 1975–1995*  
 Rich, Adrienne: *An Atlas of the Difficult World*  
 Stern, Gerald: *This Time: New and Selected Poems*  
 Szyborska, Wislawa; J. Trzeciak, trans. *Miracle Fair*  
 Trethewey, Natasha: *Native Guard*  
 Waters, Michael: *Parthenopi: New and Selected Poems*

## Appendix II

### *Ten Great Poetry Manuals to Teach Anthropologists about Poetic Craft*

Addonizio, Kim, and Dorianne Laux: *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry*  
 Finch, Annie, ed.: *After New Formalism: Poets on Form, Narrative, and Tradition*  
 Fussell, Paul: *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*  
 Hass, Robert: *Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry*  
 Hoagland, Tony: *Real Sofistikashun*  
 Hugo, Richard: *The Triggering Town*  
 Kenyon, Jane: *A Hundred White Daffodils*  
 Kooser, Ted: *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*  
 Boisseu, Michelle, Robert Wallace, and Randall Mann: *Writing Poems*, 7th edition.  
 Strand, Mark, and Eavan Boland: *The Making of a Poem*

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