Uncovering Creative Writing in Anthropology

Melissa Cahnmann and Teri Holbrook

U. Georgia

Writing serves multiple purposes in anthropo-
logy. Through writing we craft questions, record ob-
servations, analyze data and report findings. How-
ever, the art of writing is seldom an explicit
subject of discussion. Like Clifford and Marcus in
Writing Culture (1986) and Bhabha in The Vul-
nerable Observer (1996), our work builds on the premise
that anthropologists generally and ethnogra-
phers specifically have much to gain from an
exploration of the craft and practice of creative
writing as a method of inquiry. As a poet and fic-
tion writer, we bring the rhythm and imagina-
tion of creative writing to our anthropological
fieldwork in education. What can fiction and
poetry do that more traditional genres might not
during data collection, analysis and presentation?

Art/Anthropology

Creative writers and anthropologists already share
many of the same principles of quality work. Foremost
is a keen sense of observation and doc-
umentation of the descriptive details of lived
experience. Thick description—from participants'
hairstyles to the sound of cicadas or bulldozers—
Enables both creative writers and anthropologists
to draw meaning from the ordinary texture of
human experience. However, while ethnogra-
phers are likely to record descriptive data during
fieldwork, there are a number of reasons they are
less likely to draw on creative writing techniques
during data analysis and presentation.

Understandably, anthropologists may perceive
the need to safeguard the field's position in the
sciences through claims to objective, scientific
truth. Positioning oneself as a creative writer in
anthropology puts one's work at risk of being
labeled subjective, impressionistic, emotional
and, consequently, invalid. It might also jeopard-
ize access to funding, collegial respect and tenure.
However, if we consider that all claims to scien-
tific truth are suspect, influenced by the cultural-
ly bound nature of the researcher's text, we can
free ourselves to write in ways that name and
claim feeling, story and relationship.

Postmodern approaches to anthropology ren-
der all ethnographic accounts as partial and sub-
jective. Researchers can never know all there is to
know about their participants. Additionally, the
researcher is always present, implicitly or explic-
it, in any ethnographic text. We argue that with
the advent of postmodernism, the project of
anthropology has changed from one that only
seeks to authentically represent the other to one
that acknowledges the ethnographers' own per-
ceptions of their cross-cultural travels.

Despite plentiful deterrents, we believe alterna-
tive genres for anthropological work are a vital part
of generating new knowledge. Accompanying a
call for alternatives must also be a call for critical
discussions of what can be gained from an Arts-
Based Research (ABR) stance to anthropology.
While ABR also includes the visual, musical and
dramatic arts, here we examine what it means to
use the literary arts to take an interpretive stance,
one that enables the researcher to gain unexpected
insight about others as well as oneself.

Bridging the Divide

Creative writing approaches to anthropology pay
attention to what is considered valid and valuable
in scholarly communities that are both literary
and scientific. A creative writer is encouraged to
"show don't tell" (let the details speak for them-
selves) whereas an ethnographer is encouraged to
"show and tell" (show the details and tell the read-
er what they mean). Creative approaches to
ethnographic texts represent a hybrid form, rely-
ing on fictional and poetic representations of data
that embrace detail and assertion but engage the
reader as the ultimate interpretive authority.
Creative approaches recognize multiple—and at
times—contradictory interpretations of cultural
meaning and offer a definition of social science at
the center of a literary-scientific divide. Fact/fic-
tion, self/other, reason/emotion—ABR attempts
to bridge these and other dichotomies that have
to far prevented healthy mergers between the
social sciences, humanities and the arts. Likewise,
the literary arts offer a means to come to know
points of view outside the limitations of our own
Western, dichotomous constructions.

New forms create opportunities for new content
and new ways of sharing what we come to know.
Formal qualities of creative writing applied to the
inquiry process can be a means to open doors to
the unexpected. For example, crafting first-person
vignettes in the voice of a participant or a compos-
ite voice of many participants enables the researcher
to engage the other's perspective and gain new insight to the human condition. An
example project is Opportunity House: Ethnographic Stories of Mental Retardation (1998) by
applied anthropologist Michael Angrosino, who
created composite characters from data collected at
a home for intellectually disabled men. He used fic-
tional short stories to present multiple points of
view of a population traditionally gone unheard.

Another move that opens the door to empirical
discovery is in connecting the anthropologist's
cultural observations of others and the
researcher's own subjective and emotional world
during fieldwork. Cultural anthropologist Adri
Kuscerow makes these connections in her recent
book of poems Hunting Down the Monk (2002),
writing stories about others with stories about
herself during and beyond her work in Nepal and
Northern India. Through the literary techniques
of repetition, telling detail and compact, imagistic
verse, Kuscerow conveys a portrait of her field-
work that would prove elusive in traditional ethnographic prose.

Embracing techniques in creative writing can
make our discoveries more accessible and mean-
ningful to readers—including readers who are par-
ticipants in our studies—stimulating dialogue and
cross-cultural understanding. Often times
the readership we most wish to impact is exclud-
ed from our work because the genres we tend to
write in are too long, too jargon-laden and too
removed from the lived realities of our partici-
pants. In contrast, by writing ethnographies that
are engaging, we may enhance the visibility and
impact of our projects, and, with hope, increase
our influence on those who lead social change.

Developing the Poet Within

However, there is also concern about the quality,
validity and import of ABR are undergoing discussion in a
large number of venues. Currently, the Society for
Humanistic Anthropology enjoins discussions of
quality by awarding annual prizes for the best
ethnographic poetry and fiction, as well as the
Victor Turner prize for best-written ethnography.
The 2005 Qualitative Research conference QUIG
(www.coe.uga.edu/quir) will address the theme
"Art as Research and Research as Art." Finally, a
number of journals and publications explore this
area, including the "Ethnographic Alternative Book
Series" by Altamira Press. All these forums are
beginning to take the import of ABR as a given and
explore unanswered questions.

Perhaps the most important aspect of includ-
ing an ABR perspective is to reshape graduate
education in the social sciences to be more inclusive and
supportive of training in the literary, visual and per-
forming arts. While new anthropologists receive
foundations in theories and methodologies of the
field, they also could benefit from introductions to the
arts. Specifically, a focus on elements of creative
writing will enable future anthropologists to ana-
yze data and craft findings in ways that are insight-
ful, accessible and engaging to diverse audiences.

Arts-based approaches are not an either-or
proposition to traditional research paradigms. We
do no service to ourselves as arts-based
researchers to define ourselves in opposition to
traditional practices. Rather, the literary arts offer
ways to stretch our capacities for creativity and
knowledge. The free associative nature of creative
writing offers an alternative to purely linear ways of
thinking and writing about culture, one that
explores the unsayable; the tacit knowledge our
subjects sense but can't necessarily articulate and
the researchers' role in the cultural construction
of knowledge. In this way we write an anthropo-
logy that is more valid, valued and visible.

Melissa Cahnmann is an assistant professor of language
education at the University of Georgia. Her poems are
published widely in ABR, Quarterly West and other national lit-
ary magazines. For further reference on ABR see
Cahnmann (2003) "The Craft, Practice, and Possibility of
Teri Holbrook is a published poet and is a graduate student in the UGA Language Education Department.

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