

## Prologue

ANAND PANDIAN AND STUART McLEAN

An ethnography carries beings of one world into another one. This is a promise that our writing shares with fiction, poetry, cinema, and most other expressive arts. It is also a capacity we share with more literal modes of transport: the flatbeds, planes, ships, and mobile devices that take us in and out of the field, put our interlocutors in motion, and allow our stories to travel from place to place on their own. When it comes to such movements, we get caught up too often in ideas of origin and destination—where someone is coming from, where a text must go. The “how” of transportation is easily lost: the means of conveyance, the transformative potential of movement, the techniques our works rely on in taking their readers elsewhere. Writing is a transitive process of communication, a material practice no less participatory and dynamic than ethnographic fieldwork itself. This is a volume of experimental ventures in anthropological writing, attempts to explore and extend both the medium and its basic modes of displacement.

Our title is borrowed from a phrase in Paul Schmidt’s translation of “The Drunken Boat,” a poem composed by Arthur Rimbaud in 1871. Here’s how the poem ends:

If I long for a shore in Europe,  
It’s a small pond, dark, cold, remote,  
The odor of evening, and a child full of sorrow  
Who stoops to launch a crumpled paper boat.

Washed in your languors, Sea, I cannot trace  
The wake of tankers foaming through the cold,

1           Nor assault the pride of pennants and flags,  
2           Nor endure the slave ship's stinking hold.

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4       The "I" of the poem, "a little lost boat," is set loose on a river by "howling  
5       Indians," winding up adrift amid the waters, flotsam, and mythical beasts  
6       of "the Poem of the Sea."<sup>1</sup> Its travails embody the famous formula for po-  
7       etic displacement, "I is another," that Rimbaud declared in a letter written  
8       earlier that year, the phrase that Claude Lévi-Strauss would cite a century  
9       later as the very essence of the anthropological endeavor.<sup>2</sup> We find, in this  
10      image of a frail vessel adrift, a sense of the peril that can come with such exit  
11      from oneself. There is a sense here of the frustrations that lead writers to  
12      crumple and scrap the slips of paper on which they work. But there is also  
13      the sense of writing as a material adventure, a casting off, the idea of a text  
14      cut loose as a thing in the world, something delicate that might yet float  
15      to unforeseen and unforeseeable destinations—like the paper boat we are  
16      launching here, this volume.

17      Like so many European adventurers of his era, Rimbaud set sail to seek  
18      his fortune in the Orient, serving in the Dutch colonial army in Java and  
19      dealing in arms in the Yemeni port of Aden, only to succumb to illness  
20      within a decade.<sup>3</sup> Lévi-Strauss, later confronting the rubble of that colonial  
21      world, would lament in *Tristes Tropiques* that "journeys, those magic caskets  
22      full of dreamlike promises, will never again yield up their treasures untar-  
23      nished."<sup>4</sup> Certainly, the early twenty-first century seems even less a time to  
24      celebrate adventures on ramshackle vessels. Journeys are at once more com-  
25      monplace and more desperate, as attested by the plight of refugees, itinerant  
26      people, and undocumented migrants. Nonetheless, even if anthropologists  
27      and their interlocutors travel today along less exotic pathways, our writing  
28      remains a charged form of voyaging. The idea of a transformative passage  
29      remains essential to the critical promise of ethnography, a promise embod-  
30      ied most fully in the form and force of ethnographic writing—a medium  
31      imbued with both potentiality and risk.<sup>5</sup>

32      As we know very well now, there has always been something peculiar  
33      about this genre, ethnography, claimed by anthropology as its own, yet for-  
34      ever edging close to travelogue, literature, and memoir.<sup>6</sup> Think of Bronislaw  
35      Malinowski's experiments with narrative point of view—"Imagine your-  
36      self suddenly set down . . ."—in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* or Raymond  
37      Firth's effort to conjure the "unreal perspective" of a shoreline encounter at

the outset of *We, the Tikopia*. Think of what happens to the integrity of the author's voice in Vincent Crapanzano's *Tuhami* or to the clarity of that being in Jeanne Favret-Saada's *Deadly Words*. To be sure, certain ideas of science and suspicions of rhetoric have weighed down such literary flights. Ruth Benedict and David Sapir kept their poetry to themselves, and the ethnographic novels of Laura Bohannon, Hilda Kuper, and many others since have often held a tenuous place in the official canons of the discipline.<sup>7</sup> And yet the literary impulse has persisted in anthropology as an "uncanny" presence, "both desired and dreaded," as E. Valentine Daniel and Jeffrey Peck have put it, promising to reveal a more intractable and encompassing form of truth—that of the fieldwork encounter with an alien reality.<sup>8</sup>

This was one of the central challenges that motivated the "experimental moment" of the 1980s, George Marcus and Michael Fischer argued in *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, a time of heightened reflexive attention to the difficulty of ethnographic understanding and the textual devices available for such pursuits. Marcus has since suggested that ethnographic texts may have exhausted this experimental potential.<sup>9</sup> But it seems to us that certain more radical possibilities for experimentation with ethnographic writing remain unexplored, even in the wake of anthropology's "reflexive" turn. Imagine, for example, a spirit of textual adventure that took writing as a practice immanent to the world, rather than as a detached reflection upon the world and itself. Imagine the novel possibilities for thought and action that might come with a deferral of critical distance, in pursuit of a less guarded, even reckless contamination by circumstance. Imagine ways of writing that might put ourselves more deeply at risk than what we have tried till now. What could such experiments look like, and what, if anything, might they achieve?<sup>10</sup>

"In the act of writing, as in spirit possession, sexual ecstasy, or spiritual bliss, we are momentarily out of our minds," Michael Jackson reflects. "We shape-shift. . . . We stretch the limits of what is humanly possible."<sup>11</sup> Jackson's words speak to what can happen in both the writing and the reading of an ethnographic work, through the encounter, that is, with a literary force that is metamorphic by nature, acting in and upon the world and its beings. This is not the familiar image of a knower examining the things of the world at a safe remove, or the idea of a text as a representation that stands apart from the world that it depicts. Instead, what is conveyed here is the chance for something more profound and unsettling to happen through the

1 play of image, voice, character, and scene, a transgression of the limits of  
2 individual identity and the fixity of the reality at hand. “Writing is insepa-  
3 rable from becoming,” Gilles Deleuze writes, “always incomplete, always in  
4 the midst of being formed.”<sup>12</sup> We ask, with this book, what might become of  
5 anthropology if we cultivated such literary powers more assiduously.

6 This book grows out of a weeklong seminar in the spring of 2013, hosted  
7 by the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe. That seminar, “Literary An-  
8 thropology,” brought together a group of anthropologists—mostly younger,  
9 and one younger at heart than all of us—who shared a commitment to the  
10 practice of writing and a frustration with the limits of conventional scholarly  
11 prose. We shared a sense that explanations came too quickly and easily in  
12 the social sciences, stripped of the dense and deeply mortal flesh of life. We  
13 all described a desire to convey more elusive truths in experience, as well as  
14 a feeling of having been taken there by language at times in a manner that  
15 we could scarcely make sense of ourselves. We wrote on topics as disparate  
16 as roadkill in suburban America and madness in a Moroccan city, mustering  
17 resources from literary genres as diverse as epistolary memoir and apocalyp-  
18 tic fiction, philosophical poetry and cinematic scriptwriting. Still, what we  
19 held in common was the conviction that such elements could sustain a more  
20 lucid and convincing mode of anthropological thought and expression,  
21 rather than serving merely as literary props or aesthetic embellishments.

22 In the French anthropological tradition, Vincent Debaene has shown,  
23 scholarly books have always been shadowed by literary works like *Tristes*  
24 *Tropiques*, “experiences made with writing and through writing [as] a true  
25 continuation of fieldwork.”<sup>13</sup> The chapters that follow similarly take up ex-  
26 perimental modes of writing as ways of lingering with the vicissitudes and  
27 implications of empirical encounters. In Todd Ramón Ochoa’s essay, for ex-  
28 ample, rhythms of praise for the dead in Cuba compose a narrative topog-  
29 raphy of undulating pleats, folds, waves, and rolls. For Daniella Gandolfo, a  
30 conversation with a hunter on the car radio lights up the carcasses littering  
31 a parkway, pulsing all of a sudden with sentiments of both fascination and  
32 revulsion. Michael Jackson is caught up in a frustration to recall the details  
33 of another radio episode, until that feeling itself opens into an apprecia-  
34 tion for the resistance to closure that ethnography demands. Writing thus  
35 becomes a means of marking and maintaining an openness to events, sur-  
36 prises, and contingencies, to a reality that is as much a source of questions  
37 and provocations as of answers.

“Anthropology has always been vexed about the question of vulnerability,” Ruth Behar observes.<sup>14</sup> In what follows, we take this vexation as an incitement to write more faithfully to life, to its ambiguity, uncertainty, and existential risk, however difficult that task may be. Take Angela Garcia’s effort to care for an archive of personal letters from the midst of New Mexico’s heroin epidemic, a condition of deep and often painful implication that leads her to pursue “writing as a site of intimacy and struggle, mourning and survival.” Then there is what happens in Anand Pandian’s recounting of the tempestuous desires that propel a scene of filmmaking in India, a torrent of feeling that passes through his essay as a single delirious sentence. One might take such pursuits as a sacrifice of anthropological knowledge to inchoate feelings. But, as Stefania Pandolfo shows in her sensitive reflection regarding a painting born of madness in Morocco, there is a crucial philosophical horizon to such endeavors—writing with the force of passage is what equips us to think otherwise, to bend our concepts to the concepts of others.

All of these essays also share an interest in the craft of writing, an emerging focus of attention in contemporary anthropology, as seen in books such as Kirin Narayan’s *Alive in the Writing* (2012) and the collection *Anthropology Off the Shelf* (2011) and in the recent series of writers’ workshops curated by the anthropology blog *Savage Minds*.<sup>15</sup> Here, we consider how problems of understanding force a deflection in written form: into narrative prose fiction, the principal reference point for discussions of ethnographic writing, and also into other literary modes. For Tobias Hecht, the appeal of ethnographic fiction—as with his wrenching stories here from the early years of the AIDS epidemic in South Africa—lies in its ability to reveal possible worlds lodged within the apparent banality of the actual. Adrie Kusserow, meanwhile, turns to the “nomadic vagrancy” of poetry as a way of conveying concretely the liminal and unsettled state of Sudanese refugees. Lisa Stevenson’s essay, seeking to alight upon the delicate presence of the dead in the life of contemporary Canadian Inuit, assembles a montage of spectral images and nearly inaudible voices. In each of the works to come, the craft of writing is engaged as a material practice, a way of making and unmaking worlds, as attested by Stuart McLean’s experimental poem of islands of the North Atlantic, its juxtaposed fragments evoking debris descending from the familiar surface of narrative discourse to the obscurity of the ocean floor.

1           Any craft demands attentive labor as well as deference: a willingness to  
2 allow what is made to find its form, to seek the body that its materials can  
3 sustain, to exceed the intentions of its makers. This kind of attunement to  
4 the emergent potential of a process was something we often spoke of in  
5 Santa Fe, a spirit reflected not only in the substance of what each of us wrote  
6 but even in the unfolding of the workshop itself. The momentum of the  
7 conversations quickly overtook what the two of us as conveners initially had  
8 in mind, and all of us found ourselves swept up by a current of activity that  
9 pulled us along without divulging its ultimate direction. This unexpected  
10 collective energy provoked various experiments that have since found a  
11 place in this book. For example, the chapter that comes immediately after  
12 this one is a collaborative work written by all ten of us who participated in  
13 the workshop. We had decided, on the spur of the moment, to try out some  
14 writing exercises on a collaborative online platform, which we continued  
15 to revisit in the months that followed. “Archipelagos” is a text stitched to-  
16 gether from those exercises, its sentences formed of fragmentary thoughts  
17 and queries hazarded and completed in so wild a manner that none of its  
18 ideas can be assigned to any one of us alone.

19           As a collaborative introduction, “Archipelagos” aims to be faithful to the  
20 mood of this book, a place to linger at greater length on the interwoven  
21 problems of writerly heritage, craft, consequence, and responsibility that  
22 propelled our conversations. Then there are the interludes that follow each  
23 of the essays, growing once again out of a vision for the volume as a collec-  
24 tive endeavor, as something more than an aggregate of individual contribu-  
25 tions. These brief reflections, authored variously, pick up specific themes  
26 in the essays as openings into problems of method and technique in eth-  
27 nographic writing: the challenge of working with care and fidelity, of writ-  
28 ing through intercessors and other worlds, of wrestling with excess and the  
29 otherwise. Our hope is that these interludes will amplify and extend what  
30 is at stake, both conceptually and practically, in the writerly interventions  
31 made by the book’s essays. They may also communicate the polyphony we  
32 hoped to orchestrate by throwing these disparate pieces together. As Kath-  
33 leen Stewart observes in her luminous epilogue, “There is room in this writ-  
34 ing for voices to come and go. . . . Necessarily recursive, it fashions itself  
35 like a tuning fork that learns its note through small, incremental experi-  
36 ments made in fits and starts.”  
37

This book is composed with the conviction that these notes we hone do indeed matter. Questions are constantly raised these days regarding the relevance of anthropology. This has something to do with our habits of writing; as Orin Starn notes in a recent commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Writing Culture*, “We tend not to be very good storytellers.”<sup>16</sup> But there is also the difficulty of what anthropology aims to do with experience, the difficulty of thinking creatively and effectively with such tales and other forms. Indeed, in an era of Big Data the insistent particularism of ethnographic research and writing can provoke and disconcert. Witness, for example, the accusations of adventurism and worse that greeted Alice Goffmann’s recent effort to record the precarious lives of young African American men in a neighborhood of West Philadelphia. The controversy surrounding Goffmann’s book concerned not only the ethics and positionality of the white, Ivy League–educated ethnographer’s foray into the worlds of urban black youth, but also its alleged blurring of documentary and fictional modes.<sup>17</sup>

In what follows, some of us take experimental writing as a way of lending greater nuance and sensitivity to the project of ethnographic understanding, and thus of entering more profoundly into the lives and worlds of others. Other contributors to this book seek, in writing, new means of breaking with conventional notions of representation and subjectivity, putting the anthropological category of the “human” itself into question. We float this volume with the faith that inventive, appealing, and intellectually adventurous writing can serve both of these ends, while also reaching out to wider and more diverse audiences. We hope to show that such experimentation is essential to anthropology’s role in the contemporary world, and that it is one of our most powerful means of engaging it.

At the outset of an important collective effort from the 1980s to think between poetry and anthropology, Stanley Diamond mused that “the writing of poetry has turned into a particular, personal, and exhausting effort, which must fight every moment against the gravity of civilized language.” Diamond had in mind the impoverishment of everyday language in the modern world, denuded of expressive richness, depth, and rhythm. “If anthropologists were Zulus, or Eskimo, or Seneca, or Pawnee,” he wrote, “the language of everyday life . . . would make it possible for everyone to speak poetry, as many anthropologists have the imagination and experience to understand.”<sup>18</sup>

1 Diamond’s sober judgment notwithstanding, this book rests on the idea  
 2 that ethnography can infuse language with the presence of other lives and  
 3 the density of their worlds, that we can indeed learn (or learn again) to speak  
 4 such poetry—not as Zulus or Inuit, or even as anthropologists per se, but  
 5 as living beings in the process of becoming others whose identities remain  
 6 fundamentally unresolved.<sup>19</sup> Such is the promise of an approach to writing  
 7 that acknowledges the deep intertwining of language and life, image and  
 8 experience, thought and the world in which it finds a body.<sup>20</sup>

9 These ventures, as experiments, may not work for everyone. But we hope  
 10 they may carry a generative spark, provoking further explorations of the  
 11 creative and transformative potentials of anthropological writing, further  
 12 experiments, further castings off—more or less crumpled as they may be,  
 13 still drifting all the same, uncertain of whom or what they will encounter.

## 14 Notes

15  
 16 1. Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, 120–23. The image that we borrow for the title from  
 17 Schmidt’s translation was expressed otherwise by Rimbaud—“Un bateau frère comme  
 18 un papillon de mai.” But, as Schmidt explains with regard to his method, “What re-  
 19 mained for me . . . was to wrestle with Rimbaud’s poetry the way an actor wrestles  
 20 with a part, to perform what his words revealed. To arrange it? To impose order on his  
 21 derangements? No. Simply to speak it in my own language, to say what he wrote, to  
 22 tell what appears to have happened within the periods that Rimbaud himself has set,  
 23 the seasons that obsessed him” (xv).

24 2. Lévi-Strauss, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau.”

25 3. Taminian, “Rimbaud’s House in Aden, Yemen.”

26 4. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 37.

27 5. “The travel writer’s transient and literary approach, sharply rejected in the disci-  
 28 plining of fieldwork, has continued to tempt and contaminate the scientific practices  
 29 of cultural description. Anthropologists are, typically, people who leave and write,”  
 30 James Clifford observes. Clifford, *Routes*, 65.

31 6. Essential reflections on the writing of ethnography include Marcus and Cush-  
 32 man, “Ethnographies as Texts”; Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*; Clifford, *Predica-  
 33 tion of Culture*; Geertz, *Works and Lives*; Tedlock, “From Participant Observation to the  
 34 Observation of Participation”; Rapport, *Prose and the Passion*; and Daniel and Peck,  
 35 *Culture/Contexture*.

36 7. Schmidt, “Ethnographic Fiction.”

37 8. Daniel and Peck, “Culture/Contexture: An Introduction,” 1.

9. Reviewing the legacies of the hugely influential *Writing Culture*, which he coed-  
 ited with James Clifford, Marcus has argued that “the classical ethnographic textual  
 form—even as amended since the 1980s, and given its learned pleasures—is a very



partial and increasingly inadequate means of composing the movements and contests of fieldwork—both naturalistic and contrived, collaborative and individualistic—that motivate it, and on which it is intended to report.” For Marcus, the locus of experimentation has shifted to other media and sites of collaboration such as studio, lab, and design spaces. Marcus, “Legacies of Writing Culture,” 432.

10. Recent and inspiring examples of such efforts, for which a space has always existed in the discipline of anthropology, include Michael Taussig’s *Law in a Lawless Land* (2003), Kirin Narayan’s *My Family and Other Saints* (2007), Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects* (2007), Hugh Raffles’s *Insectopedia* (2010), Robert Desjarlais’s *Counterplay* (2011), Ruth Behar’s *Traveling Heavy* (2013), Renato Rosaldo’s *The Day of Shelley’s Death* (2013), Lucas Bessire’s *Behold the Black Caiman* (2014), and Paul Stoller’s *Yaya’s Story* (2014), not to mention the work of the contributors to this volume.

11. Jackson, *Other Shore*, 3.

12. Deleuze, “Literature and Life,” 225.

13. Debaene, *Far Afield*, x.

14. Behar, *Vulnerable Observer*, 5.

15. A second edition of John Van Maanen’s *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* was also published by the University of Chicago Press in 2011. Published most recently, in 2016, was *The Anthropologist as Writer*, edited by Helena Wulff.

16. Starn, “Introduction,” 9.

17. Goffmann, *On the Run*; Gideon Lewis-Kraus, “The Trials of Alice Goffmann,” *New York Times*, January 12, 2016.

18. S. Diamond, “Preface,” 131.

19. What Steven A. Tyler wrote of postmodern ethnography remains deeply compelling to us: “It is, in a word, poetry—not in its textual form, but in its return to the original context and function of poetry, which, by means of its performative break with everyday speech, evoked memories of the *ethos* of the community and thereby provoked hearers to act ethically,” breaking from reality and returning to a commonsensical world “transformed, renewed, and sacralized.” Tyler, “Postmodern Ethnography,” 125–26.

20. See Lavie, Narayan, and Rosaldo, *Creativity/Anthropology*.

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