

**McGranahan, Carole (ed.). 2020. *Writing Anthropology. Essays on Craft and Commitment*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. x + 309 pp. Pb.: \$27.95. ISBN: 9781478008125.**

Book review by

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As anthropologists, we usually consider ethnographic fieldwork to be the hallmark of our work. Writing, such a ubiquitous part of our daily routines in and out of the field, is often seen as little more than a necessary burden. While issues of ethnographic authority and representation have been important topics of scholarly debate, much less attention has been paid to the question of how anthropologists go about writing their texts, in striking contrast to the large number of books dealing with the experience of fieldwork. The volume *Writing Anthropology: Essays on Craft and Commitment*, edited by University of Colorado professor Carole McGranahan, is thus a welcome contribution and a testimony of the recent growth of interest in the art of anthropological writing.

*Writing Anthropology* is not a conventional academic edited collection. It contains 53 short essays of about 1,000 to 1,500 words each, written by 52 contributors, both established and younger scholars. Among them are accomplished writers and storytellers, such as Ruth Bethar, Paul Stoller, and Kirin Narayan. In addition to social or cultural anthropologists, the list of authors also includes archaeologists and biological anthropologists, thus covering the discipline of anthropology in its broader sense. As McGranahan

explains in the Introduction, many of the essays were first published between 2014 and 2016 as part of a series on writing that she curated for the anthropology blog *Savage Minds* (now called *anthro{dendum}*). In the book, the essays are divided into ten sections: *Ruminations*, *Writing Ideas*, *Telling Stories*, *On Responsibility*, *The Urgency of Now*, *Writing With*, *Writing Against*, *Academic Authors*, *Ethnographic Genres*, *Becoming and Belonging*, and *Writing and Knowing*.

The genesis of the texts as blog posts is reflected in their style, favouring personal reflection and self-disclosure over formal discussion and analysis. The generally fresh and accessible writing makes for an enjoyable read. The diversity of the authors' voices and of the topics covered is immense. Observing how the authors, all tasked to write about writing, have come up with diverse issues and approaches, each distilled in just a few pages, is in itself interesting and thought-provoking.

Although the book is not a how-to-guide for academic writers, the reader will find plenty of useful writing advice. Some is very practical, such as C. Anne Claus's essay *Pro Tips for Academic Writing* and Kristen R. Ghodsee's blunt list of ten steps for writing a book. Other is conveyed in poetic language or through the authors' personal stories, such as Bianca C. Williams's confession of why she gets her best writing ideas while in the shower; she makes a case for vulnerable and emotionally invested writing. A general lesson is that we should acknowledge that what we produce as anthropologists is all "real" writing, as Daniel M. Goldstein stresses in his essay. Many of the contributors, including the editor, reveal that they have struggled to see themselves as writers. That is in part due to a lack of proper training in writing. The book encourages us to change this and see writing as a craft: a creative process and a skill that can and should be learned and improved through practice.

Nevertheless, 'there is no single way to write anthropology' (p. 10), McGranahan points out. We have the freedom and challenge to cultivate our unique voice and style. Rather than focusing on quantitative productivity measures, Kirin Narayan says that we should 'care for the words, for the ideas, for the chance to say something distinctively your own, and care for readers too' (p. 44). The collection devotes significant attention to the often disregarded genres of ethnographic fiction and poetry as a means for conveying different forms of (ethnographic) sensibilities and truths. As Jessica Marie Falcone notes, 'genre-bending writing [...] my help readers understand subjects differently, and perhaps more completely' (p. 214).

Craft goes hand in hand with commitment. McGranahan, who characterises anthropology as 'theoretical storytelling' (pp. 73-77), foregrounds the researchers' responsibility to tell the stories that people have entrusted to them. Several essays reflect on writing as a commitment to ethics and to the communities with whom anthropologists work. The collection advocates for public scholarship and, as Kim Fortun says, for 'writing against the present, and writing the present forward, to futures underdetermined by it' (p. 112). Many contributors see writing as imbued with affect and as a means for affecting the world. The topics they are both personally and professionally concerned about include decolonisation, anti-racism, ethnic minorities, feminism, and the environment. I found K. Drybread's reflections on her struggle with writing about the violence she witnessed and experienced in the field particularly poignant. She concludes that 'at least for the ethnographers, writing should lead to analysis, not just catharsis' (p. 130). Meanwhile, Maori anthropologist Paul Tapsell describes what it is like to do anthropology as the Other: his challenge is 'to find effective ways to communicate to the field what it really means to be the Other when described from the position of my anthropological Self' (p. 258).

Although the vast majority of the authors work in US academic institutions, they come from a variety of backgrounds and conduct ethnographic research on all continents. Thus, I would have appreciated some discussion on the strategies for rendering foreign languages' concepts and utterances in ethnographic writing. There is an essay entitled *Thinking through the untranslatable*, written by Kevin Carrico, but it focuses on the author's inability to find words to write about the self-immolation of Tibetan activists rather than on issues of translation in anthropology. Similarly, there is also no reflection on the increasing predominance of English at the expense of other languages in the production of academic texts and the challenges this poses to researchers whose first language is different.

Despite these shortcomings, *Writing Anthropology* makes a compelling case for clear, truthful, heartfelt, and engaged anthropological writing. It will certainly be one of those books I will turn to for inspiration and solace when I find myself struggling in front of a white screen.