

# Literature, Writing & Anthropology — Cultural Anthropology

## Literature, Writing & Anthropology

by Darren Byler and Shannon Dugan Iverson



What is the work that stories do? “Literature, Writing, and Anthropology” seeks to address this question by creating a space in which fiction and anthropology converge, collide, and collapse into one another.

This collection, a collaboration between *Cultural Anthropology* and the literary journal [American Short Fiction](#), features articles, interviews, short stories, and a lecture by eleven authors. In assembling these pages, we have been surprised by the affiliations that form across the fiction, ethnography, and criticism.

Though we’ve separated the fiction from the anthropology, there is no way to easily demarcate where fiction ends and anthropology begins.

Conventionally, we have relied on “truth” as the fundamental distinguishing factor between fiction and other genres; fiction was thought to be invented, while the social sciences, journalism, and memoir presented accounts of “real” people, places, and events. Looking at the intersection of literature, writing and anthropology today, clearly this simple binary is eroding. Though anthropologists have an ethical obligation to present an accurate account of the communities in which they work, “truth” can be slippery.

Is an ethnography “true” if there is no account of the author’s presence within it? Are anthropologists simply forcing other people and their own lived experiences into preexisting trope-molds, rendering them (if not quite “untrue”) rather useless? Aren’t things like love, grief, shame, embarrassment and joy

“true”? Does the “truth” even matter if it is ultimately useless to the communities that are studied and represented?

All of the work here, fictional or otherwise, is concerned with clarifying, exploding, magnifying, or subverting different kinds of truths. Anthropology has turned to literary conventions in order to further clarify the position of the author and encourage multivocal authorship; to expose vulnerability; to reveal silences in standard discourses; and to reveal the seams in both anthropological and ethnographic practice. Likewise, fiction writers increasingly borrow from non-fiction writing genres, including the sciences and the social sciences, which in turn results in a destabilization and reworking of the “truths” contained within those genres. Lucy Corin’s short story “[Madmen](#),” included in this collection, employs a bit of Van Gennep, Turner, and Foucault to create a satirical yet sincere account of adolescence in which girls and boys are paired with “madmen” in a fictional rite of passage. As this collection makes clear, fiction and truth begin to bleed into one another as authors explore ways to expand truth and tell better stories.

A brief account of the history of the relationship between literature and anthropology can demonstrate the ways that these questions started to gain traction. This history is much longer than is usually acknowledged, in large part because ethnography is most often a written description of lifeways. [1] Though works of “ethnographic fiction” were frequently written by prominent anthropologists in the 1920s and 30s, the discipline (as a budding “science”) eventually began to discourage “novelistic” writing (two major works by students of Franz Boas, Margaret Mead’s [Coming of Age in Samoa](#) and Ruth Benedict’s [Patterns of Culture](#), were criticized on these grounds). [2] Another of Boas’s students, Zora Neale Hurston, is considered a forerunner of literary anthropology (especially for [Mules and Men](#)) and became a celebrated novelist after the writer Alice Walker publicized her work [3]; Hurston is particularly known for the classic [Their Eyes Were Watching God](#)). Since that early period, anthropology has experienced several “literary turns,” punctuated by Clifford Geertz’s 1973 [4] exhortation to produce “thick description.” Geertz’s work was followed by literary modes influenced by postmodern critiques, including reflexivity (e.g. Rosaldo 1991 [5]), experimental forms, and an acknowledgement of positioning and authorship [6] that often resulted in scholarship that overlapped with memoir [7].

The 1986 collection of essays [Writing Culture](#) reviewed anthropology’s relationships with writing, especially in the production of ethnographic “truths.” [8] This landmark publication was the antecedent of the 1996 feminist response [Women Writing Culture](#) edited by Deborah Gordon and Ruth Behar (featured in this collection). The “[literary turn](#)” presaged by these and other works encouraged anthropologists to take stock of how ethnicity and power were implicated in ethnographic composition. By amplifying the epistemic crisis of cultural representation that was brought to the fore by post-colonial literary theory and the politics of racial difference and gender recognition, these anthropologists sought to redefine both the poetics and the politics of ethnography. Most recently, two sessions at the 2011 meetings of the American Anthropological Associations in Montreal stressed the utility of literary modes for accomplishing what forms of conventional ethnography does not: injecting a personal, multi-vocal,

creative, and emotional element into anthropological writing [9].

The contributors to this collection likewise stress the continued importance of literary modes of writing and genres of critique. In our interview Ruth Behar outlines two main trends that have emerged over the past 25 years: the first, is the way “auto-ethnography” is now “more fully woven into the narrative” in ethnographic writing; the second, is a shift toward “insider” or “diasporic” ethnography in which ethnographers work “with a deep sense of connection to the places and people they write about.” In a broad sense Vincent Crapanzano echoes these sentiments, noting that “the influence of the Black liberation movements, feminism, gender and gay studies, and the internationalization of anthropology as a discipline on the writing and evaluation of ethnography” profoundly affected the range of ethnographic writing and the self-reflexivity of ethnographers. Elizabeth Enslin also remarks on the way her questioning of “what counts” as ethnographic knowledge in her 1994 article [“Beyond Writing”](#) remain an important concern for many anthropologists concerned with “applied anthropology.” For her, ethnography has to do with writing “in ways that matter to the people we study.” Stuart McLean writes that although the literary turn in contemporary anthropology has contributed to “innovation with regard to method and subject matter” from his perspective “there is still a profound resistance on the part of most anthropologists to taking writing seriously.”

## Featured Essays and Interviews: Anthropology

The *Cultural Anthropology* authors featured in this collection range from anthropologists integral to the “writing culture” movement of the early 1990s to young anthropologists who are taking literary anthropology in new directions today. Vincent Crapanzano, a distinguished professor of both Comparative Literature and Anthropology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, and Ruth Behar, professor, poet and writer at the University of Michigan, were two of the pioneers of these movements. Crapanzano’s 1991 article, “The Postmodern Crisis: Discourse, Memory, Parody,” discusses the erosion in postmodern discourses of the stabilizing “third:” the invisible authority or discourse to which interlocutors appeal. Nevertheless, memory of the previous discursive forms remain, resulting in intercultural exchanges that are structured like parody. Behar’s 1991 article “Death and Memory: From Santa María del Monte to Miami Beach” combines an ethnography of death in rural Spain with an autoethnography of the death of the author’s grandparents. This combination creates a self-reflexive style of both writing and practicing ethnography that Behar would later elaborate in *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart*. Stuart McLean and S. Lachlann Jain, professors at the University of Minnesota and Stanford University respectively, draw our attention to the importance of different epistemic and ontic approaches which find their creative center in locations such as critical ecology and queer theory. McLean’s “Stories and Cosmogonies: Imagining Creativity Beyond Nature and Culture,” argues that we may bridge gaps between Selves and Others, Nature and Culture, by taking seriously the creative and constitutive powers of time and the natural world. S. Lachlann Jain’s 2007 article “Cancer Butch” employed a mix of writing styles (journalism, memoir, anthropology, queer theory) to convey the “pink washing” of breast cancer campaigns and the silences and/or strict

narratives of femininity that these impose on women with breast cancer. Elizabeth Enslin, who works now as a writer of creative non-fiction and poetry, embodies the way anthropological knowledge can be put to work outside the academy. Despite her strong embrace of creative writing in her own life, her article “Beyond Writing: Feminist Practice and the Limitations of Ethnography” is a warning that good writing is not enough to bridge the gulfs of unequal privilege that are common between anthropologists and the communities in which they work.

## Featured Essays and Interviews: Fiction

Our collection also features stories and interviews by five fiction authors. Four of these stories were originally featured in our partnering literary journal [American Short Fiction](#). These stories serve to demonstrate the similarities between the worlds of literary anthropology and fiction: both genres are able to reveal more of the desire, emotionality, and vulnerability of their authors and subjects. Our fiction collection also serves to highlight the ways that the unique tools of fiction (e.g. absurdity, exaggeration, deliberate patterned structure, the manipulation of time, the examination of impossible possibilities) can make us see ourselves more clearly. Some of the stories collected here include canny plays on anthropological concepts: Lucy Corin’s short story “[Madmen](#),” for example, describes a fictional coming-of-age ritual in which adolescents are paired with “madmen,” a conceit which echoes both classical anthropology in the Turner/Van Gennep vein as well as Foucauldian ideas of madness and civilization. Ms. Corin is widely published and teaches fiction writing and literature at the University of California, Davis. Michael Martone’s “Four Calling Birds” is a deeply structured, playfully melancholy tale of a love affair that is both a commentary on the classical tale of adultery and a demonstration that structure contains its own undoing. Mr. Martone is the author of many novels and short story collections, including the short story collection [Four for a Quarter](#), and teaches creative writing at the University of Alabama. Katilyn Greenidge’s short-short fiction piece “[The Innocent](#)” lays bare an itinerary of desire by tracing it back to the discourse that incites it and disciplines it. Ms. Greenidge is a recent (2010) graduate of the Hunter College MFA program and has published stories in *American Short Fiction*, *The Believer*, *Green Mountain Review*, and *At Length Magazine*. L. Annette Binder’s “[Sea of Tranquility](#)” employs a gentle surrealism to talk about fatherhood and the major identity shifts of everyday life. Ms. Binder is the author of the new short story collection *Rise* (forthcoming August 2012 from Sarabande Books). Finally, Nathan Fink’s short story “[The Big Light](#),” originally published in the [University of New Hampshire Magazine](#), is an example of the visual power of writing as well as the ways that fiction can successfully manipulate time, making its audience witness trauma in slow motion. Mr. Fink teaches writing at DePaul University.

## Featured Lecture: Paul Stoller, "Writing for the Future"

We are pleased to make the audio version of Paul Stoller’s lecture “[Writing for the Future](#)” available as a downloadable audio file (simply right-click/control+click and select 'save as' to download). This lecture

took place in February 2012 as part of the [Sensorium Seminar Series](#) through the anthropology department of the University of Texas. Mr. Stoller is a pioneer in the field of literary ethnography, and this lecture is a window into his deep ethical commitment to write ethnography that matters, as well as the structural obstacles that limit the creation of such work in the academy. Mr. Stoller has worked in the Republics of Niger and Mali as well as New York City. He teaches anthropology at West Chester University. Most recently, he has begun to make documentary films.

["Writing Culture at 25"](#) by Cultural Anthropology at Duke University (YouTube)

["Fictocriticism"](#) by Michael Taussig (European Graduate School)

["Invisibility"](#) by Renato Rosaldo (via poets.org)

[My Family and Other Saints](#), a memoir by UW-Madison professor Kirin Narayan (Amazon.com link)

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[1] Langness, L.L. and Geyla Frank (1978), "Fact, Fiction, and the Ethnographic Novel," *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly*, Vol. 3, Issue 1/2, pp. 18-22

[2] Ibid

[3] See the official website of Zora Neale Hurston: <http://zoranealehurston.com/>

[4] Geertz, Clifford. (1973) [The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays](#). New York: Basic Books.

[6] Abu-Lughod, Lila: 2006. "Writing Against Culture." In Lewen, ed., [Feminist Anthropology: A Reader](#). Pp 170-185. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing; Kondo, Dorinne K.: 1986. "[Dissolution and Reconstitution of Self](#)." *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Feb.), pp. 74-88

[7] Behar, Ruth (2007) "[Ethnography in a Time of Blurred Genres](#)." *Anthropology and Humanism*, Vol. 32, Issue 2, pp. 145-155.

[8] Clifford, James and George E. Marcus, eds. (1986) [Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography](#). Berkeley: University of California Press

[9] American Anthropological Association (2010) *Tides, Trademarks, and Legacies*. Session #4-0630, "Literary Ethnography," p. 243; Session #5-0650, "Literary Anthropology," p. 359.

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