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Creative Ethnography: On Its Necessity, Challenges, and the 'Agony of Writing' in the Audit Culture

Abstract

The aim of this article is to recapitulate the process through which creative ethnography has taken shape—an academic variant of non-fiction that employs techniques drawn from literary fiction. The debate surrounding "writing culture" gave rise to experiments in ethnographic writing, an openness to storytelling, an appreciation of anthropological poetics, the development of autoethnographic forms of expression, a rethinking of the category of fiction, and a renewed understanding of the relationship between fieldwork and textual work. The author highlights both the benefits and risks inherent in these processes, suggesting that the absence of university-level training in creative ethnography often leads to personal disappointments and raises questions about the comfort of text production, in both professional and psychological terms.

Keywords: creative ethnography, fiction, autoethnography, storytelling, academic writing.

Socio-cultural anthropology is usually defined as a discipline rooted in the unique fieldwork experiences of its researchers. In reality, however, anthropologists spend most of their time in front of computer screens or hunched over notebooks – a fact wryly captured by Clifford Geertz, a 'transitional figure' for the discipline (Rees, 2008, p. 14), in his well-known quip: 'What does the ethnographer do? – he writes' (Geertz, 1973, p. 28). Despite the originality and ac-

curacy of this observation, in the decades that followed many researchers continued to adhere to the model concisely summarised by Adam Kuper (1987, p. 97): the ethnographer was expected to spend at least a year – preferably two – in the field, gradually becoming, at least to some extent, a member of the community under study. Only upon returning from the field would they begin writing their ethnographic monograph. The tendency to downplay the importance of this latter task stemmed from the belief that what truly mattered, scientifically and epistemically, had already taken place, in the heat of fieldwork struggles where the anthropological 'steel' had been forged.

The aim of this article is to trace the development of creative ethnography – an academic form of non-fiction that draws on the techniques of literary fiction. The debate surrounding *Writing Culture* that emerged in the 1980s, which gave rise to experimental forms of writing and to a rethinking of both the category of fiction and the relationship between fieldwork and textual work, invites a reconsideration of its legacy as well as an assessment of its benefits and risks. The argument advanced here points to a striking deficiency – particularly evident in Poland – namely, the near total-absence of university-level courses devoted to creative ethnography. Finally, in light of the reflections on ethnographic writing, with all its sacrifices and disappointments (Starn 2022), the article addresses the question of writing comfort – both professional and psychological.

From *Writing Culture* to Storytelling

The tendency to overlook – or even ostentatiously disregard – writing as part of the research process came under open challenge in the 1980s. As George Marcus and Dick Cushman observed,

> Anthropologists have finally begun to give explicit attention to the writing of ethnographic texts, a subject long ignored either by conceiving of ethnography primarily as an activity that occurs in the field or by treating it as a method, rather than a product, of research (Marcus and Cushman, 1982, p. 25).

In a similar vein, Barbara Myerhoff and Jay Ruby suggested that ethnography was the only literary genre that had never been subjected to analysis, adding, 'The art and craft of producing an acceptable ethnography is learned indirectly and accidentally. The question of the relationship between ethnography and other literary form is seldom discussed' (Myerhoff and Ruby, 1982, p. 23).

A groundbreaking work for raising awareness of the 'textual' or 'literary' dimension of the discipline was the volume *Writing Culture* (Clifford, 1986a), whose title quickly came to designate a particular stage in the development of anthropology. The book, the outcome of discussions and seminars, brought together researchers – mostly still relatively young – who wanted to rethink an-

thropology: its goals, methods, and very meaning, and to reconfigure it. Among them, apart from the two editors, were Mary Louise Pratt, Renato Rosaldo, Talal Asad, Vincent Crapanzano, Steven A. Tyler, Paul Rabinow, and Michael M. J. Fischer. As Clifford wrote on behalf of them all, 'We begin, not with participant-observation or with cultural texts (suitable for interpretation), but with writing, the making of texts' (Clifford, 1986b, p. 2). He added, 'The essays in this volume do not claim ethnography is "only literature". They do insist it is always writing' (Clifford, 1986b, p. 26).

The cover of *Writing Culture* featured a photograph of Tyler taken in India. In the image, the researcher is clearly absorbed in writing something in his notebook. Beside him lies a hat, and tucked behind the frame of his glasses is a white cloth for cleaning the lenses. In the background, behind the anthropologist, a few figures can be seen watching him. This, Clifford noted, is not a typical 'field' photograph: we are more accustomed to images of Margaret Mead playing with children on Manus Island or talking with informants in Bali. Yet these standard depictions are only part of the reality of fieldwork. The well-known photographs, for example, never show the inside of Malinowski's tent on Kiriwina – the very place where the Trobriand monographs were actually conceived and written. Clifford emphasised that

> writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do both in the field and thereafter. […] Writing reduced to method: keeping good field notes, making accurate maps, "writing up" results (Clifford, 1986b, p. 2).

This, he argued, is anachronistic and naïve thinking. The most basic questions that must therefore be asked are: 'Who speaks? Who writes? When and where? With or to whom? Under what institutional and historical constraints?' (Clifford, 1986b, p. 13). Further questions might follow: 'What desires and confusions was it smoothing over? How was its "objectivity" textually constructed?' (Clifford, 1986b, p. 14).

The reflexive approach proposed in the volume was meant, as Clifford envisioned, to encompass several perspectives: historical ethnography (Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Natalie Davis, Carlo Ginzburg), cultural poetics (Stephen Greenblatt), cultural critique (Hayden White, Edward Said, Fredric Jameson), analyses of the relationship between knowledge and everyday life (Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau), critique of hegemonic 'structures of feeling' (Raymond Williams), studies of science and scientific communities (Thomas Kuhn), and the semiotics of 'foreign worlds' (Tzvetan Todorov). This broad and ambitiously sketched spectrum, within which anthropological reflexivity operates, was intended to serve as a theoretical point of departure for research into the 'poetics and politics' of ethnography. Here, the term *poetics* was not limited to romantic or modernist subjectivity but, on the contrary, was associated with precision and objectivity, while *politics*

referred to the broader context of the conditions – both contemporary and historical – under which anthropologists must practise their discipline.

Clifford and Marcus's volume was unquestionably groundbreaking. It may be viewed as a kind of disciplinary watershed and a sign of a new opening in anthropology. This might sound like a cliché, but it is justified: after the publication of *Writing Culture*, almost nothing in anthropology remained the same. Among the subsequent studies that engaged with the issues it raised, the following are worth noting: *Literature and Anthropology* (Dennis and Aycock, 1989), *Modernist Anthropology* (Manganaro, 1990), *Anthropology and Literature* (Benson, 1993), *Women Writing Culture* (Behar and Gordon, 1995), *Representation in Ethnography* (Van Maanen, 1995), *Culture/Contexture* (Daniel and Peck, 1996), as well as reflexively oriented experimental writings by Kevin Dwyer (1982), Vincent Crapanzano (1990), and Ruth Behar (1996).

Particular attention should also be given to Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture*, which bears the telling subtitle *Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Clifford 1988). In this work, the author examines, among other things, the category of 'ethnographic authority', highlighting the transitory nature of the categories of art and science – exemplified in fascinating ways by the collaboration between ethnographers and surrealists in 1920s and 1930s France. By analysing various cultural practices – anthropology, travel journals, collecting, museum collections – Clifford demonstrates that the representations of others constructed through these practices are always a kind of fiction. He reserves a special place for authors deeply entangled in the multiculturalism of life and the multilingualism of creativity, such as Joseph Conrad, Bronisław Malinowski, Michel Leiris, Aimé Césaire, and Edward Said.

One may therefore venture the thesis that Clifford's statement – 'No longer a marginal, or occulted, dimension, writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do' (Clifford, 1986b, p. 2) – has become part of the discipline's self-understanding. Yet this thesis can only be accepted conditionally. Researchers have indeed succeeded in confirming the presence of distinct authorial signatures in classic ethnographic monographs (Geertz, 1988). They have also identified a distinctive anthropological style of expression known as 'ethnographic realism' (Marcus and Cushman, 1982), highlighted manifestations of anthropology's authority in the form of 'colonial textualism' (Abu-Lughod 1991), and demonstrated the existence of a specific 'politics of writing' (Ruby, 1982). Despite these important achievements, the literary dimension is still too often treated dismissively. In both teaching and research practice, field experience continues to be favoured over textual experience.

The debates and analyses initiated during this period led to a situation in which the discipline's identity began to be perceived through the prism of the tension between the spaces and experiences of theory, fieldwork, and text, as

well as through the complex and heterogeneous condition of the researcher, who exists simultaneously 'there' (in the field) and 'here' (in libraries, offices, the academy). To grasp these interconnections, scholars turned to the concept of reflexivity, which came to dominate anthropology throughout the 1990s. In its best-known and most accessible form, reflexivity was distilled into two directives:

1) the practice of experimental writing that foregrounds the researcher's subjectivity and makes use of literary forms of expression;
2) the recognition that the anthropological project of representing human diversity emerged as part of the larger Western colonial project (Whitaker, 2008; Kuligowski 2016).

The most significant textual outcomes of reflexivity were, on the one hand, the development of autoethnography, and on the other, an opening to literary experiments and inspirations. Although the original meaning of autoethnography, proposed by Mary Louise Pratt (1992), referred to transcultural texts produced as a result of European colonisation, its later understanding centred primarily on self-reflective (Maréchal, 2010) and autobiographical practices (Ellis, 2004), both in writing and in research. These practices, positioned in opposition to positivist epistemology, draw on literary conventions and forms of expression that allow for the exploration of personal emotions and experiences. As a result, autoethnography – focused on narrative persuasiveness and the presentation of 'personal truths' – helped to popularise storytelling (Bochenr and Ellis, 2006), understood both as a specific technique and as a heuristic stance.

Literary inspirations, understood as a repository of techniques and tools for representing reality, do not, unlike autoethnography, constitute a separate current within anthropology. Examples include readings of Jane Austen, in which she appears as an ethnographer of marriage and kinship within her own class in England (Handler and D. Segal, 1990) as well as inspirations drawn from the works of E. M. Forster (Rapport, 1994), from William Shakespeare's plays (Hastrup, 2004), or from Anton Chekhov, especially his documentary prose in *Sakhalin* (Narayan, 2012).

Parallel to these tendencies, another field emerged: anthropological poetics. Within this field, two distinct forms of practice became visible: ethnopoetics and anthropological poetry (Brady, 2000, p. 95). Ethnopoetics manifested itself through the study of the 'art of the word' and the presentation of local expressive forms by means of creative transcriptions and translations, which highlighted their value as expressions of art (Tedlock, 1992). The leading voice of this approach was the journal *Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics* (published between 1970 and 1980), whose editorial board included Jerome Rothenberg, Dennis Tedlock, Stanley Diamond, Dell Hymes, and Gary Snyder. Anthropological poetry, by contrast, encompassed poetic expressions most often focused on the intersections of cultures as well as on the experiences accompanying fieldwork. Illustrative

examples include the works of Stanley Diamond, Paul Friedrich, Ian Prattis, Dennis Tedlock, and Dell Hymes.

On Pundits and Healers

The processes outlined above – from the *Writing Culture* debate, 'colonial textualism', and 'ethnographic authority', through the rise of reflexivity, to the practices of autoethnography, storytelling, and anthropological poetics – gave rise to innovative and experimental modes of ethnographic writing. Researchers have successfully produced engaged works of political critique (*Why America's Top Pundits Are Wrong: Anthropologists Talk Back*, edited by Catherine Besteman and Hugh Gusterson), acclaimed memoirs (Paul Stoller, *The Power of the Between: An Anthropological Odyssey*; Kirin Narayan, *My Family and Other Saints*[1]), social novels (Paul Stoller, *Jaguar: A Story of Africans in America*), anthropological variants of romantic comedy (Kirin Narayan, *Love, Stars and All That*), collections of poetry (Dennis Tedlock, *From Work with the Zuni in New Mexico*), crime novels (Jenny White, *The Sultan's Seal*), and works that combine first-person academic ethnography with third-person literary fiction (Kristen Ghodsee, *Lost in Translation: Ethnographies of Everyday Life After Communism*).

The figure of the anthropologist as 'author', merely hinted at by Geertz in the late 1980s (Geertz, 1988), has in the last decade evolved into the anthropologist as 'writer' (Wulff, 2017a). It is no coincidence that *Anthropology and Humanism*, the journal published under the auspices of the American Anthropological Association, features sections devoted to 'Poetry', 'Fiction', and 'Creative Nonfiction'.

The examples cited above vary greatly in nature. *Why America's Top Pundits Are Wrong* is a work of polemic, advanced both in its argumentative force and emotional engagement, challenging dominant U.S. beliefs about the contemporary world, its problems, and its supposed future (Besteman and Gusterson, 2005a). The individuals responsible for propagating and legitimising these beliefs are the 'pundits' named in the book's title. The term itself comes from an older form of Hindi, where it originally meant 'teacher of religion and law' or 'authority', and later came to denote an 'authoritative source of opinion'. The contributors to the volume identify some contemporary American pundits explicitly – among them Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times*, Robert Kaplan of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Samuel Huntington of Harvard University, and Dinesh D'Souza of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

[1] This is how Narayan reinterprets the memoir form: 'It's a *we- moir*.' […]. There really is a "me" here—both the skinny, searching little girl in Bombay who made it through the difficult times narrated in this book, and the grown- up who contains and narrates her' (Narayan, 2008, p. 7).

Why America's Top Pundits Are Wrong opens with two chapters devoted to Samuel Huntington (Brown, 2005; Gusterson, 2005), the author of the highly influential *Clash of Civilizations* (Huntington, 1996) – a book in which Huntington devotes 300 pages to describing all the world's cultures and civilizations without citing a single foreign-language publication and virtually ignoring the work of anthropologists (Gusterson, 2005, p. 25). He urges his readers to accept caricatured visions of cultures built from stereotypes: Muslims are essentially born fundamentalists with a marked propensity for violence, while the Chinese are inherently authoritarian. In his account, ahistorical essentialism is blended with a deep-seated fear of multiculturalism, which, he argues, inevitably leads either to genocide (as in Bosnia) or to an unpredictable and potentially catastrophic conflict (such as the 'Latino fifth column' supposedly being formed in the United States by Mexican immigrants).

Kaplan is subjected to criticism in a similar tone (Bringa, 2005; Besteman, 2005). As the author of the popular *Balkan Ghosts* (Kaplan, 1993), he uncritically perpetuates an image of this part of Europe as a perpetual war zone, populated by tribal passions and resentments harking back to the Middle Ages. According to his narrative, everything that happens in the Balkans stems directly from their history and is determined by it to the highest degree, with the region's past presented in a monochromatic and sombre register.

The editors suggested:

> In our national debate about such questions, some of the loudest voices belong to pundits […] Although they do not all come from the same side of the political map, they draw on and embellish a loosely coherent set of myths about human nature and culture that have a strange staying power in American public discourse: that conflict between people of different cultures, races, or genders is inevitable; that biology is destiny; that culture is immutable; that terrible poverty, inequality, and suffering are natural; and that people in other societies who do not want to live just like Americans are afraid of "modernity" (Besteman and Gusterson, 2005b, p. 2).

The common feature of the pundits under critique is what might be termed 'reactionary determinism' – sometimes more neutrally referred to as 'realism'. This position rests on a 'syndrome of inevitability', which amounts to arguing that 'things must be this way'. Thus, if African Americans are disproportionately poor, it is allegedly because they are intellectually weaker, and no social programmes can change this; rape, in this view, is the result of genetic functioning rather than a product of culture; and people from different cultural traditions are destined for antagonistic rather than constructive relationships.

The contributors to the volume advocate a different kind of 'realism'. This approach, grounded in the achievements of the social sciences – and neither left-wing nor right-wing, neither liberal nor conservative – clearly demonstrates that cultures can change, that traditions are invented rather than eternal. As they write,

> human beings constantly misrecognize the world they have made as the natural order of things. While the pundits whisper in our ears that nothing can be done to make the world a better place, we know that this is wrong (Besteman and Gusterson, 2005b, p. 23).

At the opposite end of the continuum of creative ethnography lies Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes's book *In Sorcery's Shadow: A Memoir of Apprenticeship among the Songhay of Niger* (Stoller and Olkes, 1987). Before the book was written, Stoller met the elderly Adamu Jenitongo, a healer from the Songhay people of Niger. Under Jenitongo's guidance, Stoller learned about medicinal plants, prayers, methods of divination, as well as techniques of defence and attack through sorcery, eventually becoming his apprentice. This apprenticeship lasted for sixteen years.

In the end, drawing on his field notes, Stoller wrote an academic book based on the knowledge he had acquired. In 1984, with a printed copy of the manuscript, he visited his teacher. After explaining the purpose of his visit, he spent three months reading to Jenitongo, five to ten pages at a time. Jenitongo listened in silence, without correcting a single error or offering any praise. At the end, however, he expressed his disappointment, which concerned above all the style of storytelling, which he found inadequate. He then said something that profoundly changed Stoller – both as an anthropologist and as a writer:

> You must produce something that will be remembered, something that describes me and you, something that my grandchildren and your grandchildren will use to remember the past, something they will use to learn about the world (Stoller, 2017, p. 120).

Significantly, the sorcerer's critique mirrored Stoller's own growing sense of dissatisfaction, as he gradually realised how many field experiences had been filtered out through the sieve of 'ethnographic realism' and lost in a text written in the standard academic mode (Stoller, 2017, p. 118–120). As a result, Stoller and Olkes (who was also his wife and took part in the final phase of the research) created an entirely different book: a first-person memoir of their fieldwork between 1976 and 1984. This work included vivid, sensory descriptions of places, detailed portraits of key figures, and full dialogues rather than the fragmentary quotations that had previously been accepted as the norm in anthropological texts.

Of course, this was not the first attempt to integrate two different cultural frameworks within a single narrative. A similar ambition had once guided Frank H. Cushing, who wore Zuni clothing and signed his letters as '1st War Chief of Zuni' (Green, 1990). Another point of comparison is Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, who, while studying the magical practices of the Azande and recognising them as a coherent system of thought not fundamentally different from religion, ultimately adopted a stance of cautious scepticism (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). There is also the inevitable association with Carlos Castaneda and his cycle of fictional tales about Don Juan Matus – an author, Stoller remarked, 'with whom I did not want to be compared' (Stoller and Olkes, 1987, p. 25).

In Sorcery's Shadow reveals the consequences of an almost complete opening of the researcher to local categories – including the application of the knowledge passed on to Stoller when a member of the Songhay asked him for help in taking revenge on a European, and the magical means employed achieved the desired effect. 'I was frightened of this power as well as of the notion that sorcery was real', Stoller confided (Stoller and Olkes, 1987, p. 123). The book's narrative, novelistic in tone, full of events and adventures, and ostentatiously rejecting the constraints of 'ethnographic realism', is at the same time an account of the radical application of an emic strategy, in the strict sense of the term (Pike, 1967).

From workshops to the embrace of fiction

Another significant outcome of anthropology's opening to the literary dimension has been the emergence of classes and workshops devoted to the craft of ethnographic writing. Anthropology curricula began to include courses aimed at developing the skills needed to produce engaging, stylistically varied texts that would appeal to readers. Several universities have introduced such courses – among them Harvard University, California State University, University of Vermont, Arizona State University, Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences, George Mason University, Northridge, McGill University, Queen's University, The New School, University of Leeds, University of Oslo, and the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (The Graduate Institute, Geneva). At times, these courses have been accompanied by the publication of 'guides' and 'manuals', such as *A Student's Guide to Reading and Writing in Social Anthropology*, published by Harvard in 2010. However, this is by no means the norm, as becomes clear when these offerings are compared to the widespread availability of 'Creative Nonfiction Writing' courses at universities. These aim to encourage a general openness to literary ways of representing reality – including in the online environment, where digital publication forms predominate.

A crucial ally of these newly emerging courses has been a shift in the understanding of fiction. Previously, recourse to fiction was associated either with the ethical frameworks of anthropological work (such as the pseudonymisation of places and people) or with the need to conceal the authorial self – or with both aims simultaneously, as in the case of *Return to Laughter* by Elenore Smith Bowen (1954). In fact, this was a pseudonym concealing the true identity of Laura Bohannan (Elenore was her mother's first name, and Smith her own maiden name). In the author's note opening the book, she writes: 'All the characters in this book, except myself, are fictitious in the fullest meaning of that word. I knew people of the type I have described here; the incidents of the book

are of the genre I myself experienced in Africa. Nevertheless, so much is fiction' (Bowen, 1954, p. 5). *Return to Laughter* was written as an autobiographical, first-person narrative, and it addressed, in an open way, problems that were at the time generally kept out of official accounts. Bowen/Bohannan did not hide her research dilemmas. She revealed her mistakes and missteps, showing how the fieldwork enterprise lost much of its aura as an objective effort to uncover an external, causally structured reality.

Clifford reminds us in this context that the concept of 'literature' is a transitional category. Beginning in the seventeenth century, Western science excluded certain forms of expression from its repertoire – rhetoric, subjectivity, fiction – assigning them instead to the domain of literature. Thus, when it is suggested that ethnography is a form of art or literature, this refers to its older understanding as the 'skilful fashioning of useful artifacts' (Clifford, 1986b, p. 6). In this sense, ethnographic writing is a fiction – something fashioned or shaped, in line with the Latin root of the term *fingere* – and good ethnographies are, ultimately, 'true fictions'. This oxymoronic expression was further developed by Vincent Crapanzano, who compared the writing ethnographer to a trickster, promising, like Hermes, never to lie, while at the same time never being able to tell the whole truth (Crapanzano, 1986). This limitation arises from the inevitable rhetorical nature of anthropological texts, which 'are thus inherently partial – committed and incomplete' (Clifford, 1986b, p. 7).

Destabilising the notion of fiction and detaching it from the strictly literary domain of expression had significant consequences. Fiction increasingly came to be seen as a useful tool, enabling anthropological knowledge to be applied in new and innovative ways that, as Ulf Hannerz suggests, may lead to 'developing new genres' (Hannerz, 2017, p. 256). Fiction also became a complementary mode for communicating research results with the explicit intention of reaching a broader audience. Examples include Oliver La Farge's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1930 novel *Laughing Boy*, and, more recently, Darcy Ribeiro's experimental novels, which combine the language of government documents and ethnographic reports with mythic narration and a polyphony of voices speaking in both the first and third person (*Maira*). Similarly, Amitav Ghosh's prose – such as *In an Antique Land* – draws on anthropological techniques. In an interview, Ghosh explained:

> The field notes were the "anthropological" part of my work; the diaries were more literary. My dissertation was based almost entirely on my field notes; similarly the first-person narrative in *Antique Land* is based on my diaries (Stankiewicz, 2012, p. 536).

The epistemic benefits of employing fiction have also been recognised in relation to anthropological poetry. Victor Turner (1983) observed that the achievements of ethnopoetics 'bring to light' issues of multiculturalism. Ivan Brady added to this, pointing to problems of historical politics, racism and relativism,

arguing that anthropologists' use of diverse expressive forms – including poetry – stems from the need to say things that could not effectively be conveyed through other means (Brady, 2000).

At the same time, one aspect has not changed: publishing remains a necessity for those working in higher education and serves as the fuel for anthropological careers. Ongoing debates about whether monographs or journal articles are more important, the dominance of citation index regimes, and the well-known slogan 'publish or perish' are all consequences of this reality. Helena Wulff captures this tension succinctly:

> Anthropologists have mostly celebrated the field experience in all its variety. Yet in fact, they are likely to spend as much time sitting in front of the computer screen. Once it has begun, writing is in one way a very solitary activity, but in another way, it is not: you may be in interaction with an imagined audience of colleagues, students, as well as people in your field, perhaps general readers, and increasingly, the representatives of academic audit culture (Wulff, 2017b, p. 1).

Coda

Despite the processes described above, creativity in ethnographic writing – understood as producing texts rich in meaning and employing diverse figures, modes, and styles to engage a wide range of readers – continues to be marginalised. 'How, one asks constantly, could such interesting people doing such interesting things produce such dull books?' Mary Louise Pratt asked years ago (Pratt, 1986, p. 33). This century, Laurel Richardson expressed the same frustration even more forcefully: 'For years I had yawned my way through numerous supposedly exemplary qualitative studies. Countless numbers of texts had I abandoned half read, half scanned' (Richardson, 2005, p. 959). Pratt's question and Richardson's confession remain just as relevant today, particularly where creative ethnography – as a research, writing and teaching practice – is either absent or treated dismissively.

This is all the more surprising given that anthropology's past could easily be told through the bestselling books published over the decades: from James G. Frazer (*The Golden Bough*), Margaret Mead (*Coming of Age in Samoa*), Ruth Benedict (*Patterns of Culture*), and Bronisław Malinowski (*The Sexual Life of Savages*, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*), through Zora Neale Hurston (*Mules and Men*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*), Claude Lévi-Strauss (*Tristes Tropiques*), Carlos Castaneda (*The Teachings of Don Juan*), and Nigel Barley (*The Innocent Anthropologist*), to Marc Augé (*Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*), Thomas Hylland Eriksen (*Small Places, Large Issues*), and Gillian Tett (*Saving the Sun: How Wall Street Mavericks Shook Up Japan's Financial World and Made Billions*). Another way of telling this story might be to

trace the changing conventions and textual modes of representation: from ethnographic realism, with its typical use of the *praesens ethnographicum*, to later experiments with modes of expression, the position and role of the narrator, multi-authored formats, and the inclusion of dialogue and character descriptions within the text.

Reconstructions of this kind – though perfectly legitimate – are not common. There remains a persistent reluctance to think of anthropology as a writing enterprise. The flip side of this reluctance is the belief that the discipline's identity is rooted primarily in the specialised tools and techniques of fieldwork. As a result, agrarian metaphors dominate (*field, fieldwork, fieldworker*), rather than textual ones (*author, authorship, writing*). And yet, despite the development and spread of new technologies, it is textual narratives that remain the central medium through which the results of anthropological research are communicated. In this light, the absence of courses in Polish university ethnology and anthropology programmes devoted to cultivating the skills needed to produce vivid, engaging and compelling texts must be regarded as not only surprising, but frankly embarrassing.

Nor is this merely a problem affecting students. Orin Starn has courageously shed light on the range of difficulties faced by university faculty who lack adequate preparation for the task of writing. He used the phrase 'agony of writing' to describe this experience and confessed:

> My dissertation, soaked in sweat at my desk, blocked and panicked for months, my first fall into full-blown depression. A colleague finding me, some years later, curled sobbing on my crummy office carpet, certain I'd never finish the tenure book I needed to keep my job. A second book, weeping once more, this time in the cellar so the kids wouldn't hear me, and contemplating suicide (Starn, 2022, p. 187).

Starn gives another example: a researcher isolates themselves in a remote cabin to write a monograph after completing fieldwork, only to end up burning their field journal and smashing their laptop. Significantly, the 'agony of writing' can last an entire professional life. The syndrome of bitterness, insecurity and disappointment – described as 'professorial melancholia' – affects academics even in the 'late' stages of their careers. According to U.S. statistics, writing is an easy process for only 10% of researchers, a struggle for 80%, and a source of dysfunction for the remaining 10% (Starn, 2022, p. 194). Notably, the majority of those facing serious psychological difficulties with writing come from the humanities.

Given that in most master's and doctoral programmes in anthropology, the skills associated with creative ethnography are still treated as secondary – and that these same programmes often assume such skills can be acquired through some kind of natural osmosis, without dedicated courses or textbooks – it fol-

lows that the 'agony of writing', intensified by the pressures of academic audit culture, will only become more widespread.

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Etnografia kreatywna: o jej konieczności, wyzwaniach i „agonii pisania" w kulturze audytu

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest podsumowanie procesu, w którym ukształtowała się twórcza etnografia – akademicka odmiana literatury faktu, wykorzystująca techniki zaczerpnięte z literatury pięknej. Debata wokół „kultury pisania" dała początek eksperymentom w pisarstwie etnograficznym, otwarciu na narrację, docenieniu poetyki antropologicznej, rozwojowi autoetnograficznych form ekspresji, ponownemu przemyśleniu kategorii fikcji oraz nowemu rozumieniu relacji między badaniami terenowymi a pracą nad tekstem. Autor podkreśla zarówno korzyści, jak i zagrożenia związane z tymi procesami, sugerując, że brak uniwersyteckiego wykształcenia w zakresie twórczej etnografii często prowadzi do osobistych rozczarowań i stawia pytania o komfort tworzenia tekstu, zarówno w ujęciu zawodowym, jak i psychologicznym.

Słowa kluczowe: twórcza etnografia, fikcja, autoetnografia , opowiadanie historii, pisanie akademickie.