

**Pandian, Anand and Stuart McLean (eds.). 2017. *Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. 264 pp. Pb.: \$25.95. ISBN: 9780822363408.**

It is a widely accepted assumption that writing is an essential element in all stages of the anthropological pursuit. However, questions such as: ‘What does it mean to write anthropologically?’, ‘Where are the limits of a text to be labelled ethnographical?’, ‘What does ethnographical writing ought to include, and what does it need to avoid?’ inevitably produce diverse and conflicting answers. Thirty years after *Writing culture*, a group of anthropologists convened for a seminar on literary anthropology within the School of Advanced Research, which (also) resulted in the collection *Crumpled paper boat: Experiments in ethnographic writing*. Eleven authors created heterogeneous and explorative contributions, addressing some crucial issues of contemporary anthropology: representation, voice, responsibility, reality, craft, power, and ambiguity.

The *Introduction*, written collectively and signed merely as “Paper Boat Collective”, establishes an interesting communal voice(s). The collective claims that ‘anthropologists write, and write a lot’, but the majority of these pursuits are ‘evaluated with a narrow standard of accuracy in mind: how closely they ‘represent’ some other world out there, how faithfully they mediate between that world and those who make and consume anthropological texts’ (p. 12). However, and I think this notion is crucial in understanding both the reviewed collection and the literary anthropology in general – transmission between the lived world and the written text is much more than merely an issue of accuracy. ‘Writing, as a mode of expression, shares its creative energy with the milieu from which it emerges’ (p. 13–14), which precisely implies that the ethnographical texts can follow a more experimental, less linear path. There is an epistemological place for both uncertainty and doubt but also for rethinking the notion of reality. For – as the contributors point out – the problem anthropologists face ‘is not a lack of reality, but what to do with it’ (p. 20).

In the opening chapter, Angela Garcia discusses how to incorporate a collection of letters written by her informants, three generations of female kin in New Mexico. The questions of how to archive, read and reproduce them are placed in a broader contextual frame of addiction and loss – as one informant writes in a letter to her mother: ‘It’s hard to write because it hurts’ (p. 30). In his inventively, richly woven text, Michael Jackson elaborates on the questions of fidelity, pointing out that ‘[P]erhaps literary anthropology holds out the promise that we may finally do justice to appearances and find virtue in verisimilitude without the fear that we are behaving unprofessionally, or repudiating science’ (p. 51). Furthermore (his writings being a beautiful embodiment of it), he claims: ‘Language should be used to express rather than impress, to connect people rather than create hierarchies’ (p. 64).

In the chapter about anthropological poetry or “anthropoetry”, Adrie Kusserow uses poetry to convey the unsettling images and liminal places of confusion when researching refugees from South Sudan. Poetry helped her to ‘bring to the forefront of consciousness a whole landscape of deep emotion, unspoken inequalities, and conceptual

complexity' but also to employ 'a different tone of voice, a more vulnerable and more emphatic one' (p. 87).

Stuart McLean's chapter is a poem, *Sea*, as well, but, unlike Kusserow's, written in a form which that his own verses as well as fragments from other texts in a somehow postmodern manner. The poem and the sea itself share its ever-moving, fluctuational nature, with no clear beginning and end. The postscript added at the end is a valuable insight into the ethnographical background of the poem. It also brings forth an interesting question, namely how much context do we need to grasp a text ethnographically? To what extent are the readers challenged when encountering experimental ethnographic writing? Do less conventional, more ambiguous texts also require more active, open or even "experimental" audiences? Especially when encountered with poetry (Kusserow, McLean), ethnographic fiction, placed in Cape Town at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, intertwined with the thoughts on denial and denialism (Tobias Hecht), or intensive perspectival shifts in Anand Pandian's writing about desire in Indian cinema. A compelling solution to the danger of texts being too hermetic is the short reflections that follow every chapter. These commentaries widen (and sometimes deepen) the readers' experience of each chapter.

Perhaps the crucial tool when grasping these texts is the willingness to imagine. This brings us to Stefania Pandolfo's text, in which she deals with the experience of madness in Morocco. The author uses the term "imaginal" when discussing the paintings created by Ilyas, one of her informants, who suffers from psychotic illness. She compares both Ilyas and ethnographer to a seismographer when it comes to 'allowing her voice, and her words, to be transmuted' (p. 106). Her contribution is valuable because it also shows one possible way of writing about (and with) primarily visual ethnographic material.

Todd Ramón Ochoa, who is discussing the phenomenon of bembé in Cuba, effectively introduces the multi-layered features of it through a fleeting conversation with a librarian at the university in North Carolina. When describing bembé, he states: 'It moves to, and is moved by, outside forces. It is receptive to outside forces and seeks them, thus regularly churning out new versions of itself' (p. 177). Thus, in a way, it resembles ethnographic writing.

The dynamic between "outside" voice in the form of a radio conversation with a hunter and theoretical insights of Ortega y Gasset creates an interesting counterpoint in Daniella Gandolfo's contribution. The last chapter, *A proper message* by Lisa Stevenson, is a moving and masterly composed textual montage that questions care, voice, grief, and loss in the Canadian Arctic.

An interesting common thematic anchorage of numerous chapters (Garcia, Kusserow, Hecht, McLean, Stevenson, Gandolfo) is indeed loss, death or some form of trauma. Perhaps the experimental yet highly deliberate modes of ethnographic writing can also enable articulating the most sensitive nuances of anthropological pursuit. Because, as Kathleen Stewart phrase in the *Epilogue*: 'The authors [...] turn these essays into a problematic of what writing does to thought' (p. 230). One of the valuable qualities of the collection is precisely its openness to potentially vulnerable encounters.

ANA SVETEL

University of Ljubljana (Slovenia)