

# Introduction: The Writer in the Anthropologist

*Maria D. Vesperi and Alisse Waterston*

Off the shelf and into the hands of well-informed general readers. That's the *where*.

The *who* are increasing ranks of anthropologist-writers, folks whose words could burn right through the covers of the prestigious journals where they might consign them if their eyes weren't fixed on that *where*: the bookstore window, the policy library, the bedside table.

The *what* are texts these anthropologists-writers produce, mostly ethnographies but also history, critical analysis and works of creative non-fiction.

The *why* is the weight of this work, too imminent to contain, too heavy to be borne by those who would publish simply not to perish. These are stories that must be told, sometimes at the risk of personal rejection or professional failure. "We have taken upon our shoulders an enormous responsibility that is beyond any allegiance we might owe to the academy or any desire for tenure," writes Irma McClaurin in her contribution to this volume. "We hold in our words, real people's lives."

The *when* is right now, before the policy is made, the hope crushed, the genocide completed.

It's not that anthropologist-writers believe their work can change the world, although some admit freely to outsized assumptions about the potential impact of a book or article. It's just that they won't give up on the job of sharing anthropological knowledge in straightforward, powerful ways.

"I think it is enough to be able to document carefully and clearly what is happening," suggests Paul Farmer. "That is my idea of speaking truth to power with books."

Encouragement in that direction comes from Andrew Barnes, a journalism leader and Pulitzer Committee veteran. "Too much of our public discussion is superficial," he observes. "We need more ideas grounded in

fieldwork and rigorous thought. It's worth your effort to take anthropology to the broadest possible audience."

Increasing numbers of anthropologists agree. But for many who would take it public, the *how* is the rub.

Ruth Behar opens her contribution to *Anthropology off the Shelf* with comments from an editor who sought to remove "cultural anthropology" from the blurb touting her newest book, *An Island Called Home* (2007). The editor explained that "since we're marketing the book as a trade book, we need to reach the general reader, and any reference to an academic discipline is a turn-off. They say it's toxic. They've done studies."

"They" say a lot of things but Behar resisted, as any discipline-based writer might. After all, many scholarly books are reviewed in the mainstream press, featured in bookstores, selected for prizes that signal to readers: "Pick this one! A must read!" Well-crafted books about language, ideology, history, politics, war, race, poverty, health, gender – and so much more – routinely find their way onto "must read" lists and win non-fiction awards, in part because their orienting premises and narrative structures are accessible to diverse audiences. Few anthropology books meet this criterion and even fewer enjoy such notice, even when they treat the same topics.

At the core of *Anthropology off the Shelf* is a critical analysis of whether the models anthropologists use for framing, illustrating and contextualizing information and ideas facilitate or hinder engagement with the well-informed general reader of non-fiction. The project began as a way to approach this problem by tracing specific books from their intellectual origins to publication and beyond. In a series of four panels presented between 1999 and 2005 at the American Anthropological Association annual meetings, some 20 writers and editors offered straight talk about the desire to reach intended readers and how this goal became wedded to the writing process – for better and for worse. They revisited difficult, sometimes painful choices about conceptualization, crafting and marketing. They discussed, in retrospect, which strategies were effective and which ones fell flat. They revealed specific decisions about theoretical framing, unit of analysis, contextualization and narrative structure in representing ethnographic material. Bravely, they probed further to expose the rich but rarely tapped lode where commitment, inspiration and motivation are pressed hard by racism, sexism, real and imagined critics, ethical quandaries and ingrained writing habits, productive or otherwise.

Sometimes the result is a diamond.

From the start, "Anthropology off the Shelf" sessions drew large audiences brimming with questions. People were hungry for frank conversation about the passions that prompt a researcher to enter the public conversation

through scholarly literature, and where acting on such passions might lead. Talk remained sharply focused on the process of writing: what anthropologists really do in their everyday writing lives and how they get folks to read what they write.

Our decision to follow in the tradition of the “writers on writing” genre promoted engagement across a broad range of research topics and anthropological allegiances. Despite the purported intellectual and praxis divide in anthropology, the opportunity to talk about writing itself revealed more overlap, more fluidity than the much-discussed boundaries between such camps seem to suggest. Participants could agree to disagree as they shared fresh insights about how theory, epistemology, methodology, ethics, politics and potential applications shape the structure and texture of a book.

It’s no secret that conference-to-book projects can lack collective spark. Sometimes readers are left to wonder what unites a collection of essays beyond that ephemeral moment when their authors shared a skirted table under hotel ballroom lights. Surely, there was excitement in the room. The audience was engaged. So much seemed possible. Too bad it didn’t survive the telling.

In the case of *Anthropology off the Shelf*, however, the four panels generated dialogue and reflection that continued to develop and mature. All but one of the contributors to this volume participated in the original four panels. And as they persisted in grappling with the issues – and equally important, persisted in living their lives as writers – many were moved to radically revise their essays. Some are altogether new. As a result, the collection reveals important new patterns in the ongoing, often frustrating, rarely celebrated process of taking books or articles from their initial conception to their fruition, and beyond to their reception by targeted readers.

Anthropologist-writers reveal a clear pattern when they discuss the power of imagining the audience for a particular work. In many cases, the Oz-like images of teachers who drove graduate school writing in certain directions gave way first to equally constraining fantasies of scowling colleagues at peer-reviewed journals. “Every time I sit down to write, I knock a host of academic critics off my shoulder who tell me I *can’t*, *shouldn’t*, *wouldn’t* write what I believe in; that I *must* follow their guidelines for ‘truth,’ academic style,” reports Carolyn Nordstrom.

“When I think of my own progression as a writer,” reflects Ruth Behar, “I believe I have gone from trying to write for my teachers to trying now, in the most recent phase of my work, to write for my mother so I could write for the world.”

There is general agreement that dialogue with institutional phantoms must be abandoned before an anthropologist-writer can hope to be understood beyond the academy. “The key, of course, is to present things in such a way that they can be heard and taken in,” notes Catherine Kingfisher, “a goal anthropologists also pursue in the classroom when teaching about topics such as racism, colonialism and gender inequality.”

“The norms and conventions of citation determine so much of how you tell your story, and these conventions become ingrained, to the point where the writer often thinks everyone can read that dialect,” Andrew Barnes observes. “A lot of us can’t, and won’t.”

Dialect is a polite word for jargon and the tortuous sentence structures required to support its weight. It’s a bumpy read. Would-be social scientists become inured to the ill effects of this writing style through a slow but effective inoculation process that begins in college. They might protest at first, but by graduate school most are fully accommodated to this dense code and more or less eager to reproduce it. Colleagues and students for whom the going remains hard are left to stammer along as best they can. Some drift away from academia for this reason; they aren’t motivated to sustain the code-switching required to hold forth in academic high jargon.

In contrast, general readers out grazing for knowledge are free to taste, reject, leave the “lardballs,” as Karen Brodtkin aptly names them, half-chewed. Through conversation or bad reviews, they warn others off their feed as well. Like any shoppers, folks who invest in books gauge the quality of the medium before they spoon up the message. If it’s lardy, they leave it on the shelf. If it’s tougher to open than a shrink-wrapped compact disc, well advised, they move on.

The title of Marie Cardinal’s *The Words to Say It* is a haunting mantra, a compelling summary of the longing associated with novelists but experienced by anthropologist-writers as well. *Anthropology off the Shelf* reveals the persistent question behind this desire: the words to say *what* to *whom*? Who can be counted among the readership by those who would aim beyond the captive audience of tenure and promotion committees? How wide is the potential audience for an anthropologist’s work?

“I think that progressive anthropologists *can* reach large popular audiences, as I hope to do with my New Haven book, with skillfully written, accessible, historical ethnographic narratives that eschew biting the public cultural hand that feeds them,” writes Micaela di Leonardo, reflecting on a work-in-progress.

Lee Baker structures his historical writing to help students “think differently and critically,” beyond the familiar dualities. “I always write for my

undergraduate students, and I often have a specific class in mind when I begin to tackle a research project,” he explains.

Karen Brodtkin writes for “two different but connected audiences,” undergraduate students and “a community of kindred political intellectuals, both activist and academic.” Over the years her audiences have changed, but each has been clearly envisioned. *Caring by the Hour* (1988), for example, “used as jargon-free a style as I knew how.” The book remains in circulation two decades later, Brodtkin is pleased to note, and “my greatest joy has been the fact that, so I’ve been told, at least two unions engaged in hospital organizing in the South and on the East Coast have used it as an organizing manual and in organizer training.”

Some frame particular writing projects by imagining direct, point-counterpoint engagement with readers. In her work for the editorial and op-ed pages of the *St. Petersburg Times*, Maria Vesperi learned that the efficacy of opinion writing springs from accurate, balanced data collection and clear delivery to closely targeted readers. Some editorials have a “readership of one” – the governor, say – while others, the ones that are toughest to write, speak to broad but vividly imagined communities.

Signithia Fordham employs the term “counternarrative” to describe her engagement with the public through popular media. “The determination to claim a space in American public discourse for a viewpoint that comes from my position as Black and female is an integral part of my quest for justice,” she explains. “In an effort to practice writing as a form of social activism, I submit op-ed pieces for publication by well-known newspapers and magazines.”

Similarly, “I wanted to *talk back to* those mothers of my daughter’s classmates who believe it when the tabloid press, some popular politicians and social scientists depict *other* women as undeserving and disreputable,” recalls Alisse Waterston in describing her imagined audience for *Love, Sorrow and Rage*. And, at the same time, “I wrote *in dialogue with* an imaginary interlocutor, my colleagues in anthropology, especially those with a critical, political-economy perspective and those interested in urban poverty issues in North America, including the US.”

Academic writing comes with disciplinary qualifiers: there is anthropological literature, historical literature, area scholarship. Prompting that general reader to reach for one’s book obliges the writer to move beyond academic caveats, to aim for “something we call literature,” as Ruth Behar puts it. Behar titles her essay “Believing in Anthropology as Literature,” and belief – faith in one’s skills – is required if a book is to fly off the shelf and into a canvas tote on the shoulder of that well-informed general reader.

Among the contributors to this book are scholars who peruse Clifford and Marcus's *Writing Culture* (1986) as a guide to form, in the same way they might pick up an edition of Strunk, White and Angell's *The Elements of Style*. They are not deterred from Clifford Geertz's call to craft in *Works and Lives* by his ironic caution that tradition trusts "plain texts" as credible ethnographic work, discounting attention to writing as odd, "suggestive even of sharp practice" (1988: 2). They aren't hampered by canons or schools or even disciplines, because the readers they seek don't respond well to the narrative conventions required.

Moving beyond the foundational qualifier "anthropology" is a difficult step, however, and not one the contributors to this volume seem eager to make. Instead, they demonstrate eagerness to work seriously with form in ways that enlarge anthropology's potential to provide accessible, in-depth information and analysis about things that are amiss in the world.

As a result, however, they must take risks with their writing, pushing the safety zone of disciplinary protocol in ways that are rarely welcomed by colleagues. There is perhaps no greater example than the career of Zora Neale Hurston, who shines posthumously as an enduring beacon for those who would risk mislabeling and misunderstanding to position themselves between the reflexive tasks of a scholarly life and progressive engagement with the world.

Discussing the privilege and inspiration of "Walking in Zora's Shoes," Irma McClaurin foregrounds how Hurston "linked ethnographic observations and anthropological analysis with literature" in powerful and compelling ways. McClaurin explains why it is "important to write in ways that move our communication beyond the scholarly constraints that have shaped most academic writing, and truly get at what Zora called 'de inside meanin' of words.'"

The late Octavia Butler created fictional worlds that reached deep for the inside meaning of real ones. Her work inspired anthropologists and also journalists such as Sharon Ball, the former cultural desk editor at National Public Radio. Ball confided to Butler herself a special dream that "I, too, always intended to write. At that point, [Octavia] looked up and said, not unkindly, 'Well, you'd better get to it!' and she smiled right at me."

Butler understood the need, the *sine qua non*, for a writer to grasp that elusive *how*. "There was that voice, soft and strong, telling funny stories and offering straightforward advice about the key elements of a writing life: Research; Realism; Description; Details; Family stories; Serendipity; Persistence; Go on Learning; Walk the Ground You Want To Write About; Write Your Passion," Ball remembers gratefully. "As you see, I took notes."

“More and more, I dare to think I can call myself a writer, plain and simple,” ventures Ruth Behar. “But I can’t forget that I took up the pen for the same reason all anthropologists do: because we care passionately about the worlds that others inhabit and not just about our own small worlds.” Of course, she notes, many fiction writers share the same concerns. Yet, “Our imaginations are in service to real communities we know firsthand and to real journeys we’ve taken across land and sea. And this isn’t a bad thing at all, so long as we know how to spin a tale about all that we’ve witnessed.”

In the essays found here and in less formal conversations about writing, memories of those who would undermine the writer’s confidence and ability to “spin a tale” float vividly to the surface. Remarking on his early experiences, Arthur Spears shared this: “Throughout my schooling I was accused of plagiarizing papers because ‘no reasonable person’ (black teacher or white professor) could possibly believe that I had written them, this though I was an honor student throughout.”

Let no good writing go unpunished.

Signithia Fordham begins her chapter this way: “She writes like a (Black) girl.” Fordham revisits the sentence, turning it this way and that, revealing at each stage how her efforts to write in her own voice were “blacked out”: “Nowhere was this blackout more apparent than in how my schoolmates and I were required to write. Narration, the academic benchmark used to judge the adequacy of our presumed or compulsory transformation, was highly stylized and formulaic. Writing in our native voices – regardless of the circumstances or our level of sophistication – was either erased or repeatedly edited by our teachers and other school officials to fit a preexisting template.”

“Research,” Maria Vesperi concluded in her middle-school years, “meant a trip to the public library and diligent paraphrasing from the dog-eared offerings on hand in the Juvenile Section.” A dry affair, mechanical, less compelling than the daydreams that competed for her attention, and usually won.

From childhood through graduate school and well beyond, contributors to this volume have struggled to pry free of preexisting templates and the numbing conventions they impose. Each anthropologist-writer identifies tension between the creative impulse to tell a story and the formal constraints of the anthropological canon. “You’re not good enough, never will be,” whisper Carolyn Nordstrom’s imagined critics. “Even kindly friends and unctuous journal editors trying to help me by explaining ‘how it is done’ and why my style ‘just won’t work’ join the others on my shoulder.”

Writing teachers such as Peter Elbow (1998a, 1998b) and Chip Scanlan (2005) cite the babble of imagined critics as a source of paralyzing writer's block. In his workshops with writers, Scanlan urges them to ignore such voices – at least for the moment – or risk failing to find their own.

Anthropologists confront ongoing ethical and epistemological challenges in their efforts to represent others, and contributors to *Anthropology off the Shelf* are no exception. This collection demonstrates that some must reach even further, first confronting how racism and/or sexism complicate efforts to represent *themselves* as individuals, as social observers and as writers. Signithia Fordham, for instance, points to “the rapacious hegemony of the pen” that leads African American schoolchildren to “fear our own writing, and to fear that what we wrote would further distort our lived reality.”

“Whether it is baggy pants inspired by prison garb or a simple white t-shirt that belies any gang affiliation, the pattern is the same,” observes Lee Baker. “When black people appropriate it as their own, the meaning changes and the object, or sound, or food, or clothing takes on a new meaning. Sometimes it's negative, but often it is positive; most always it is shot through with ambivalence and anxiety.”

Popular response to *How Jews Became White Folks* (1999) taught Karen Brodtkin a lot about self-positioning. While she dubs the book “my biggest success at reaching a readership that goes far beyond the usual suspects,” she was also prompted to think further about where the anthropologist in the writer should aim to be: “I think that what is missing in this book is a better sense of what do you do once you recognize you have race privilege? I'm not sure that there is, even now, a political community that is asking that question. I think we should be asking it very seriously.”

Evidence of a book's reception can be painfully thin, particularly for its creator. “I think it is important not to fool ourselves about what it is that our books do,” Paul Farmer states pragmatically. “. . . generally, if we're lucky, our books are read by 5-, 10-, 15,000 people or maybe a few more – but the sales don't lie.” Farmer suggests that anthropologist-writers might come closer to their goals by pairing writing with activism and dispensing with the conceit that their books have clout. “Do we really need to claim that we are altering the impact of noxious social forces with our writing? I think it is better to simply acknowledge we don't, and then have our own reasons for doing what it is that we do.”

“In the face of being outflanked by big power, activists taught me the importance of incremental and partial victories,” observes Eben Kirksey.



Looking back on a long career as reader and writer, scholar and activist, Howard Zinn remains convinced of the book's ability to speak truth to power. "I am persuaded about the importance of books simply by my own experience," he states.

At the same time, Zinn acknowledges that it can be hard to comprehend fully what books *do*. "One reason is that it is very rare to find a direct line between the writing of a book and the changing of a policy," he explains. "But I think you can find indirect lines, and you can find eras in which writings appeared and people's consciousness was raised and policies were changed, sometimes after decades had passed. The long trajectory between writing and changing consciousness, between writing and activism and then affecting public policy, can be tortuous and complicated. But this does not mean we should desist from writing."

Catherine Kingfisher doesn't plan to desist, but she wants to know more about who pays attention to her research findings – and why. She offers this advice to other anthropologist-writers: "Systematically tracing the processes associated with the production and travel of knowledge would allow us to determine whether our ventures off the shelf are leaps into oblivion or jumps to places that may someday prove beneficial."

As a historian of anthropology, Lee Baker shares Zinn's long view. "I am perfectly aware that studying the history of anthropology makes an insignificant contribution to the marginal field of history of science," he offers candidly. "I do not have the immediate, life-saving impact of someone like Paul Farmer. Yet, I still believe my efforts are important for better understanding how racism works by trying to document how even the most progressive social scientists and most thoughtful political activists usually fail to shake loose the noose of racism that constricts and tightens the harder one fights."

In "Racism as Statecraft," Arthur Spears describes his effort to meet students' need for an anthology that "laid out the principal issues connected with racial categorization and racism and that clearly articulated these issues with those relevant to gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality." The initial reception by his publisher was, well, chilly. While *Race and Ideology: Language, Symbolism, and Popular Culture* earned positive reviews from readers, Spears continues to wonder about how publishers treat authors whose work "speaks ugly truths to a many-tentacled power."

"I did have great hopes of contributing to important scholarly conversations about gender, race, and class shifts in American history, politics, and culture," writes Micaela di Leonardo, reflecting on the reception of *Exotics at Home*. "I have had modest success here. . . . I do not, however, expect to reach a large popular audience with the book, because of its scholarly

tone, because of its intransigent anti-postmodern stance, because of its radicalism in a conservative era – but most importantly, because the book offers a serious critique of precisely the public culture in which popular reviews would appear.”

Eben Kirksey, the youngest contributor to this volume, entered college in the mid-1990s. He describes the climate for a new generation of anthropologists when he writes: “In creating an anthropology that is ready to travel off the shelf we should be prepared to face multi-directional demands for accountability – from informants who “talk back,” from libel laws, and from a reading public who desire particular narrative forms. Being deceptive, presenting flimsy knowledge claims, will clearly not aid the political struggles of people who seek us as allies. Learning to follow the epistemological standards that operate in different domains, and mediating among these systems of knowing, can produce knowledge claims that stick.”

Claims that stick, words that matter – these are the elusive prizes that drive anthropologist-writers to place their critiques, analyses, and social criticisms in the public domain. “To succumb to the belief in our own ineffectiveness is to play into the hands of the worst of distorted political arguments and to provide fodder for furthering our own marginalization,” Alisse Waterston asserts.

The Gray Panthers’ refusal to succumb to social injustice without a fight drew Roger Sanjek to them when he was barely out of graduate school. He participated in the activist group for years, only later deciding that their story “could be the subject of a book” that he could write. Or could he? “I was a participant, not an observer, and I had taken no fieldnotes,” he recalls.

Sanjek refers to *Gray Panthers* (2009) as “the book that wrote me.” He points out that it “has little to do with research proposals, standard fieldwork, or academic career hurdles. Still, it is the work of a social anthropologist who has attempted to employ an ethnographic sensibility and adhere to canons of validity he advocates.” Equally important, as Sanjek explains, it is the work of someone who has lived the story and who is willing to embrace the moral responsibility of positioning himself as storyteller.

Anthropologists write stories across the broad range of the human condition: things that go wrong, things that go right, those that need fixing and those that call for celebration right now. Anthropologists place their stories in the public record, in print, knowing that they can be used to affirm or indict – if not today, perhaps tomorrow. Stories have unanticipated endings; some become weapons in the hands of those who tell or those who hear.

Despite these uncertainties, where there is passion about something that needs to be said, the writer in the anthropologist survives.

That's the hope.

"The fact that the war orphan's story has seen the light of day means the fight is worth it," writes Carolyn Nordstrom. Whether anyone reads it, now or later, is something that anthropologist-writers are willing to take on faith. There are role models. Although she did not live to see it, Zora Neale Hurston's writing has endured that "long trajectory between writing and changing consciousness" described by Howard Zinn.

Its trajectory off the shelf may be long, but time disappears when a book is in readers' hands. "Now, when I feel that itch to talk to Octavia," writes Sharon Ball, "I read something she wrote and I remember the promise she made as we ended each of our conversations: 'I'll be talking to ya.' And in the way that mattered most to her, she still does."

That's the victory.

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