

# Anthropology and the misery of writing

Orin Starn

Department of Cultural Anthropology, Duke University, Durham, NC, USA

## Correspondence

Orin Starn, Department of Cultural Anthropology, Duke University, Durham, NC, USA.

Email: [ostarn@duke.edu](mailto:ostarn@duke.edu)

## Abstract

We have had much excited talk about experimental ethnography and new genres of writing. Much of it acknowledges the difficulties of putting words to page. But few of the many reflections and meditations about ethnography really delve into the self-destroying anxiety and misery that can accompany writing in anthropology and across the humanities. That many of us—from graduate students to tenured professors—have suffered bad, sometimes career-ending trouble with writing is a public secret. I draw on my own struggle with writing and depression to try to make some sense of why desperation and worse related to writing are so relatively commonplace in anthropology today—and whether there's anything we can do about it.

## KEYWORDS

anthropology, depression, writing

## Resumen

Hemos tenido una conversación estimulante sobre la etnografía experimental y los nuevos géneros de escritura. Mucho de ella reconoce las dificultades de plasmar palabras en una página. Pero pocas de las muchas reflexiones y meditaciones sobre la etnografía realmente profundizan en la ansiedad autodestructiva y la miseria que pueden acompañar el escribir en antropología y a través de las humanidades. Que muchos de nosotros—desde estudiantes graduados hasta profesores titulares—han sufrido problemas graves con el escribir, que algunas veces hasta terminan con sus carreras, es un secreto público. Me baso en mi propia lucha con el escribir y la depresión para tratar de lograr encontrarle sentido a por qué la desesperación y peor relacionada con el escribir son relativamente un lugar tan común en la antropología de hoy —y si hay algo que se pueda hacer sobre ello—. [*escribir, depresión, antropología*]

Writing comes up sometimes when we're making small talk at the year-opening department reception or some other get-together. "Do you like writing?" "What's your routine?" Maybe some joking about how much coffee we need to get started. I customarily default to a well-worn saying, by turns attributed to Robert Louis Stevenson, Dorothy Parker, and Gloria Steinem: "I hate to write, but I love having written."

It's true enough, as far as it goes. But it leaves out a lot, memories not among my favorites. My dissertation, soaked in sweat at my desk, blocked and panicked for months, my first fall into full-blown depres-

sion. 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. And a lot more unpleasantness that I'll spare you a fuller listing.

I recently started thinking more about writing's dark side after publishing a new book, coauthored with a historian friend. It was by turns panned and ignored, and I wallowed some in the self-pity and resentment of so-called postpublication malaise, the syndrome where you

brood over why something you've put so much of yourself into is not greeted by angels and trumpets. ("Three years to create a book. Five lines to ridicule it," Albert Camus lamented.)<sup>1</sup> Why keep writing, I wondered, when I dislike doing so in the first place? And aren't there already too many books out there for too few readers? I was supposed to give a campus talk about my choice of topic. So I decided to use the opportunity to reflect more on writing and why it can lead us into bad places. I made dates with a few friends whom I knew had it hard at their desks for their thoughts.

I started with a friend I'll call Susan, taking her to breakfast.<sup>2</sup> A marvelous anthropologist, Susan did brave fieldwork in Eastern Europe under trying conditions. But I knew she suffered tremendously over her dissertation, and, although her ambition had always been to become a professor, she ended up taking a job as a campus administrator. As the waitress brought our pancakes and oatmeal, Susan told me about the crisis that led her to abandon her academic aspirations.

Her plan had been to revise her dissertation into a book. That, she thought, would improve her job market chances, and she wanted to do it anyway, especially after landing a fellowship to free some time. Susan had a small child, and getting going was hard. So she rented a cabin in the mountains for a couple of weeks to jump-start the manuscript, leaving her husband to hold down the home front. In the first few days, she progressed little, rereading fieldnotes and shuffling draft fragments. According to Victoria Nelson, in her classic *On Writer's Block*, the "cabin in the woods" writing fantasy is as often as not an illusion—and a dangerous one at that. "As any peasant can tell you, the wilderness is full of demons that feed on the souls of solitary humans," Nelson (1993, 24) explains. She thinks most of us are more likely to be productive in social and connected contexts than in hermit mode.

As days passed, Susan's thoughts turned wild and scary. She'd had mental health struggles before, and the idea of killing herself flooded her mind. She noticed a box of rat poison on a shelf and recalled reading somewhere that it is a common means of suicide in the Mumbai slums. A leafy overlook was nearby, a good place to end it. Only with effort did Susan realize what she had to do: destroy her manuscript, or it would destroy her. She went out to the driveway, struck a match, and burned her fieldnotes page by page—hundreds of pages and two years of research in ashes. To get rid of backups and chapter fragments, Susan drove over her laptop, then backed up over it again for good measure. Worried that the hard drive might still be intact, she dropped the shattered laptop at a recycling center before heading back home. Her husband asked her how it had gone. She couldn't tell him for some weeks. And she gave up for good on pursuing an academic career.

This article seeks to make some sense of the experience of Susan and too many others in our beloved discipline. We have spent decades now mulling over the politics and poetics of ethnography, and, more recently, numerous practical books provide sensible advice about the how-tos of the craft.<sup>3</sup> It nonetheless remains a bit of a public secret just how bad writing trouble can get: a fact not exactly unknown yet not much openly talked about either. At a workshop or over coffee with a colleague, we may commiserate, confess to struggling—yet seldom cross the line. "You can't say: I'm crashing. I'm not going to make it," says a friend who has agonized for almost a decade over her first book.

Revealing vulnerabilities to the wrong people—an advisor, department chair, or loose-lipped acquaintance—can harm your reputation and even your career. Most people only talk about the worst of writing misery with those closest to them or maybe a therapist. We know that nobody likes a complainer anyway.

And appearances can be deceiving; that much is certain. When I have mentioned struggling with writing and depression to friends for the first time, they are always surprised, sometimes disbelieving. I have been productive enough over the years, if far from speedy. But writing trouble is not picky. Although graduate students, as they contend with the trials of belonging to the low-ranking academic caste, may be the most vulnerable, it can get unpleasant for just about anyone, anytime, and in any degree of acuteness. There's the first-year doctoral student trying all night to get a seminar paper done, in tears and ready to drop out by daybreak. The adjunct at a state university who freezes up at her desk in what little time she has away from grading. And then there's the aging professor who after a well-received first book anguishes for the rest of his life over never being able to complete that awaited new one—the Ralph Ellison and Harper Lee complex. "I've got writer's block as big as the Ritz and as stubborn as a grease spot on a gabardine suit," Ellison told a friend (Callahan 2019, 282).

Each of us has our own relation to the writing process. Those who get to the suicidal extremes like Susan and me are probably outliers, and, of course, many academics besides anthropologists also struggle. And for some people, being at their desk is less a danger zone than a safe haven—or a bit of both. Why are some of us able to more or less avoid the worst of it? Why does the process turn toxic for others? What may or may not be special about the challenges of writing for anthropologists? That first conversation with Susan led me to speak with many more people of varied backgrounds and at different career stages. For a wider view, I also talked with career coaches, writing instructors, and therapists who treat academics. I sought a fuller sense of the experiences, causes, and ways of coping with writing trouble beyond the ritualized pieties about brewing yourself a hot cup of tea and taking it bird by bird.

What I better realize is just how many traps lay ready to trip us up along the path to getting our writing done. What's wrong with me, the anguished writer wonders? Why can't I suck it up, stop with the self-pity and neuroses, and get to the finish line with what I'm working on? As much as we ought to know, as good twenty-first-century anthropologists, that the discourse of individualized responsibility is the biggest neoliberal shell game of them all, we still often blame ourselves.<sup>4</sup> Nobody ever said it should be easy to write a halfway decent seminar paper, dissertation, or book, tasks that will always demand some measure of persistence and willpower. But beating ourselves up over our failings ignores that writing is hard to the bone—lonely, full of ups and down, without guarantees. And, more than that, the inclination to believe that garbled unfinished text on the screen in front of us proves our own pathetic inadequacy fails to account for the many built-in obstacles to something like a healthy relationship to writing in the fishbowl (or shark tank?) of academia. That writing misery has so much to do with a constellation of unhappy wider dynamics in anthropology, the university, and the world makes it what literary theorist Ann

Cvetkovich (2012) describes as a “social feeling,” no matter that it so often feels like a personal deficiency. It would be strange indeed if some number of anthropologists did not sink into despair and despondency about their writing given all that can tug us down that way.

I would like to relate a bit of my story, although I draw as much on what others have shared with me. We do not need a pity party, and, all the more amid the overdue interrogation of white privilege, I know I risk cutting the unattractive figure of the whiny white male professor. But I have seen enough beloved students and treasured colleagues get into nasty writing difficulties to want to join the small yet growing cohort of those seeking to bring the problem more into the light.<sup>5</sup> If you sink too low into anxiety and depression, just making it through the day can be hard. There may still be some value or at least solace in knowing how easy it can be to lose your way in the wilderness of words and expectations. You are in the company of many others, even if it so often feels like you are all alone.

## FEAR AND LOATHING IN DISSERTATIONLAND

A grimy little scatter of rubber-eraser shavings: I brushed them off my desk every so often. Back then, in the late 1980s, most of us still drafted by hand before typing the text into a computer to save on the legendary “floppy disk” of the early digital age. But I had nothing worth saving anyway, despite being back for almost a year from fieldwork in Peru. Sometimes I would erase the same sentence so many times that I’d tear through the page of my yellow legal pad.

I was living in a broom closet of an apartment in San Francisco’s Mission District, before the bland moneyed rule of the tech economy had swallowed the city’s soul. One theory attributes so-called thesis block to a subconscious wish to avoid relinquishing adolescent freedom for adult responsibilities. The graduate student life can certainly have its gratifications, between new friends, a few good parties, and the chance to read, think, and explore directions for your own research. It’s an apprenticeship, however, and you also receive plenty of reminders of your lowly position, whether the back seats at the seminar table or the scavenging for funding and favors. Like most students, I hoped to become a professor myself, or, failing that, some other grown-up job, and in any event not to become the “gradual” student of the jokes. A friend of mine’s ex-husband labored on his University of Chicago dissertation for over four decades before dying in his sixties, maybe the world record for thesis writing. Who wants “ABD” (all but dissertation) inscribed on their tombstone?

Besides the degree, I had loftier motivations for writing back then and even now, mostly ones described by George Orwell in his classic “Why I Write.”<sup>6</sup> One was what Orwell labels “historical impulse,” namely the wish to document little-known stories or to set the record straight about misunderstood ones. I had done my fieldwork about rural organizing in Peru, a place by turns exoticized, romanticized, and disdained. The tale of mountain villagers making common cause seemed to me to deserve a hearing. Just who would read my dissertation was another matter, since I suspected my more distracted committee members would skim, at best. I did receive some scribbled comments from one of them while he was on his Hawaiian beach vacation.

Like many of my fellow graduate students, I had no truck with hoary white-lab-coat objectivity. What Orwell called “political purpose” had led me as a long-haired, Marx-reading, would-be rebel into anthropology in the first place, namely “the desire to push the world in a certain direction.” The upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s had brought demands for more politicized and activist forms of scholarship. I was active in Peru’s human rights movement, and I hoped, albeit vague on the details, that my work might contribute to justice and freedom by illuminating struggles in the global margins. Just what influence anthropology has beyond university walls is not at all clear, although certainly a great deal less than might be guessed from our well-meaning, impassioned, and never-ending ruminations about the politics of fieldwork, ethnography, and social change. A rising generation of younger scholars of color has lately questioned just how far the field has really decolonized itself for all its ostensible leftist correctness.<sup>7</sup>

And, yes, I wanted to make a name for myself. Our modest discipline does not lack for ambition, self-promotion, and jostling to climb the status ladder. That makes us no different from other intellectuals, and, in fact, what Orwell lists as another common motivation for writing is “the desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood, etc.” Writing always requires some sheer egoism, given the time and energy it exacts as the price for completion. “The reason authors almost always put the dedication on a book is because their selfishness horrifies themselves in the end,” explains the novelist/protagonist of *Misery*, a Stephen King novel. Although I never thought I was very smart and was intimidated by those seminar wunderkinder who seemed to know more than the professor, I was ready to put in the work on the thesis. That was the required first step toward anything like a successful career.

I had not expected to have too much trouble. Even as a child, I was punctilious, more like neurotic, about getting things done (“Orin performs well in spite of extreme tenseness,” read my first-grade report card). My father was an academic, ready to help if need be. It was also an exciting time in anthropology, the decade of new calls for reflexivity and experimentation, attention to power and history, and the reinvention of the field. Our graduate seminars often had the flavor of kangaroo courts where we invariably found the assigned reading guilty of the crimes of exoticization, complicity with imperialism, and other unparadonable shortcomings. How hard could it be to do better? Our brave new generation would seize the tools of Marxist, feminist, and poststructuralist theories to fashion a more progressive anthropology. We had little clue about how much harder it is to write a text than cut it to pieces.

And indeed, there I was a year in with nothing to show for my efforts. I’d try out an argument for a chapter, only to realize a few hours, days, or sometimes weeks into the drafting that it was not going to work. I kept my wits about me at first, since, for all my hubris, I had been told that writing demands trying, failing, and trying again. As months passed, however, I grew more panicky, wondering why I seemed so paralyzed. That worrying, naturally, only made it harder to get anything done, like the proverbial snare tightening down on the rabbit the more it wriggles to get free. I could not keep my mind from looping into unhelpful

negative thoughts—about dropping out, about my girlfriend leaving me for a failure, about breaking down altogether. I hated the obsessiveness and self-absorption without being able to find my way clear.

Some claim that madness and creativity can go hand in hand. According to psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison (1996), many great artists have been manic depressives, and we are familiar with the mythologized figure of the suffering genius, from Van Gogh to Sylvia Plath. I do not know about the geniuses, but my troubles have never felt generative of anything. They made only for a banal brew of anxiety, self-loathing, frustration, guilt, anger, despair, and hopelessness, all emotions I had experienced now and again as a child yet grotesquely magnified as the eraser shavings piled up on my desk. If you have already suffered episodes of severe psychic distress, that can leave you all the more vulnerable to the demands of a big writing project like the dissertation. “I had other issues,” Susan told me without going into detail.

Even my best efforts to snap out of it went awry. Thinking a break would be good, I went on a day-long ocean fishing trip out beyond the Golden Gate Bridge, inviting my dissertation advisor along. The sea was rough, and we didn’t catch a single fish. I had a salmon on, but when I reeled in my line, only the fish’s lips dangled from the hook. A sea lion had torpedoed up to rip away everything else. Nor was it the hoped-for bonding experience with my advisor. He got seasick, threw up into a paper cup, and hurried off as soon as we got back to shore.

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I was too ashamed about my state of mind to tell more than a few friends. Only after seeing quite a few of my own students struggle badly would I realize how common dissertation despair is in one form or another. “The stakes are *way too high* for a piece of work that should really be considered one early, modest effort in a line of many more,” says a former student I will call Olga.<sup>8</sup> “Your life seems to hinge on writing this one text. There was so much agony over finding the one angle or formulation that would distinguish mine from many others. I was nauseated by the certainty that by the time I managed to get my version of the mantra, it would be old news.” A kind and brilliant scholar with a history of depression, Olga fought off strong suicidal wishes to finish. The dissertation was not, as she had hoped, the ticket to a job. She picked up a few courses at a big state university until, despite being a beloved teacher, the chair told her it could no longer contract adjuncts. Olga was forced from academia to scramble for a living with a teenage daughter and expiring visa.

That the dissertation can be so harrowing has explanations big and small. In the larger scheme of things, of course, we live in an age of worry and anxiety, where major depressive disorders afflict almost ten percent of Americans a year, more than nineteen million people and trending up in the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup> The British Marxist Mark Fisher claims that depression is the “shadow side” of contemporary capitalism.<sup>10</sup> The precariousness of making a living in a world of haves and have nots is certainly one obvious reason for the frequency of mental health distress. That it seems to be just as epidemic among the

more affluent professional classes testifies to the perverse impossibility of the great modern expectation to happiness and self-fulfillment. Feeling entitled to a good life is a setup for sensations of failure and inadequacy when, as is their wont, the realities of living do not always spark joy. The dimensions of aloneness and disorientation in a marketized world contribute to sensations that Fisher described from his own episodes of severe mental anguish: “Without connections, without stability, with nothing to hold you upright or in place.”<sup>11</sup>

And, yikes, what to say about graduate school? One survey finds that doctoral students suffer from mental health disorders at six times the national average, a figure that sounds more or less right for anthropology (Evans et al. 2018). Learning the jargon. Being able to cite the latest hip theorists. Working a second job to pay tuition. Rejected grant applications. Trying not to sound stupid in seminar. It is easy to feel like an outsider or even an imposter, especially for women, students of color and from working-class backgrounds, and international students in an environment where older white men still disproportionately occupy the full professorships and the high university administrative positions. And, of course, an academic job market that toggles between horrible and bad does little for graduate student spirits. Every department should be required to post a sign: “Warning: Anthropology Graduate School Can Be Hazardous to Your Health.”

The dissertation presents its own perils. Our research sweeps us up into whatever world we happen to be studying. Even so many years later, I remember so much about my dissertation fieldwork, be it the midnight sorcery sessions down by the river or the grief of my dearest village friends at the death of their tiny newborn baby. Transitioning from the sociability, drama, and discovery of fieldwork to a dull solitary indenture before the computer screen can be disconcerting. Writing the thesis quite brutally forces you to leave so much of your fieldwork experience behind in the cutting, excising, and compacting to try to fashion an argument of some more general interest. “The awful thing about writing is how much you can’t say,” as journalist Katherine Boo (2007, 16) observes. Many dissertation writers get too blocked to write much of anything, just as I did. But I have sometimes seen the opposite tendency among my own advisees, namely the 50- or 60-page (once 90-page) chapter. We do not want to let anything go.

Nor do dissertation writers have much preparation for the waiting task. By now, in the early twenty-first century, after decades of debate about ethnography and its conventions, most of us no longer talk about “writing up” findings, as in the more sciency old days when anthropologists imagined themselves to be reporting fixed truths verified by their fieldwork “data.” Only at our desks, in fact, do we really figure out what we think and make the defining decisions about what to leave out, what to include, how to shade what we tell to suit our purposes. (“Language is the mother, not the handmaiden, of thought,” said the poet W. H. Auden.) Even so, most anthropology doctoral programs still tend to treat writing as an afterthought, and, in much the same way as teaching, a skill students are somehow expected to pick up by osmosis, with scant training or guidance. Almost all departments have a required theory seminar for incoming students, but few a writing course. Many professors do little line editing on papers, as if all that really counted were the loftier matters of theory and concept. I did

not realize how little I knew about writing until I lost my way in the dissertation.

The sheer scale of a dissertation does not help. When you are feeling low at your desk, coming up with single decent sentence can be hard enough. Isn't every sentence, in fact, its own devilish anagram? Each one demands that you try to sort the twenty-six different letters into a working order from almost infinite permutations. To get your dissertation done, you have to get those hard-fought sentences to fit in a paragraph, that paragraph into a chapter, and then for each chapter to cohere within an overarching argument. Most graduate students have not previously done anything longer than a seminar paper or maybe a master's thesis. Embarking on a dissertation is like entering a marathon with no distance training.

Then, too, we must measure up to expectations. The good anthropologist should evoke the nitty-gritty of local life yet also plug their analysis into the latest hip theory debates. As much energy has been devoted to bringing to light the perils and pitfalls of ethnographic writing by now, trying to get our own done can feel like walking through a minefield of political, ethical, and epistemological charges waiting to detonate. "A lot of don'ts," explains Miguel Diaz-Barriga, a leading anthropologist of the US-Mexico border. "Not so many Dos." The uncomfortable sensation that your writing may be found lacking does not make it any easier. You do not want your dissertation any more than your seminar interventions or conference presentations to be judged as something less than "smart," that not-quite-definable yet University of Chicago-ish and maybe now Columbia-ish would-be cutting-edge-ish, theory-ish, not-always-easy-to-follow-ish way of being an anthropologist.

The dissertation writer expects support from her advisor. Many get it, but the advisor/advisee relationship can also be one more drag. Sometimes advisees may simply be neglected, the syndrome of the celebrity professor too occupied with other matters. Conversely, the controlling advisor can create all manner of grief for his advisees, demanding a dissertation to his own specifications (and this kind of advisor is indeed often a man). At worst, of course, we have skin-crawling cases of sexual predation and unwelcome advances. A senior Harvard anthropologist emailed a doctoral student wondering about something more "intimate" than lunch before going on to ask, "What if I got a hotel room and then we got a bottle of wine and spent an afternoon in conversation and exploration?"<sup>12</sup> This kind of behavior can and sometimes does lead women to leave graduate programs for good.

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I should have been alert to writing's hazards from childhood experience. As a boy, I'd go upstairs to ask my father, a UC Berkeley historian, to come out to play catch. His office smelled of yellowing books and pipe smoke, as the offices of white male intellectuals once did. A prodigy hired at a tenure-track job in his early twenties, he published a path-breaking article but was tormented by his first book. He'd barely look up, tense with anger and frustration, and say he was too busy

to play just then. When his book finally appeared many years later, it received little notice for all his efforts.

A sizeable minority of professors are, like me, the children of professors. That the job has this hereditary medieval quality is no surprise in a country where the myth of mobility and limitless opportunity is mostly just that. One somewhat counterintuitive theory postulates that the children of academics are actually more likely to get screwed up about writing than others for laboring in the long Freudian shadow of their parents. If graduate students from working-class families do not have the benefits of familiarity with the university world, they may also not have quite so much invested in it or be so likely to fall into the pathology of believing that their writing determines their value as human beings. "Writing just feels more like a particular kind of labor, built into my family background," says Shane Greene, the son of a painter and dental assistant and an anthropologist of punk and revolution.<sup>13</sup> That I had what I assumed to be the advantage of a professor father—and a journalist mother—made me feel that much more a failure when I could not get the dissertation done. I could not get my head right even though I knew it made no sense to be so consumed with fear and guilt over a rotten doctoral thesis about obscure peasants that nobody cared about anyway.

I wish somebody had told me that most dissertations are pretty bad. My overambitious original intention had been to write a thesis that would be publishable without too much revision. But a dissertation is really more like a crude first draft for a book—a first stab at writing anything so long, at synthesizing a huge amount of material, at figuring out what to say. Only a clever lucky few write theses good enough to go to press without big revisions. The rest of us must do years more of research, interminable rethinking and revising, and may never make it all. The shiny university press ethnography is the consummate fetish, concealing the years of sweat and tears that went into it.<sup>14</sup> Expecting your dissertation to measure up to anything like that standard is a recipe for disappointment.

I did have enough sense to scale back my hopes. As my first year back ended without a single chapter drafted, I realized I had to get the dissertation out of my life to keep some semblance of sanity. That led me to lower progressively my expectations from doing a book-quality thesis, to an OK thesis, to just about anything at all. If most dissertations are bad, mine was really bad—and short, too, at 175 pages. To reach the minimum respectability of 200 pages, I changed the spacing from double to 2.5 and widened the margins to an inch and a half, and, still a page short, pasted in a poem about the Incas and potatoes that had little to do with anything. Novelist Natalie Goldberg (2016, 15) calls the writing process "composting," a stinky dump of experiences, drafts, and ideas turning with time into fertile ground for growing good text. I realize now that my dissertation was part of that composting, a necessary if unpleasant learning exercise. It just felt like garbage at the time.

It took a few months, but finishing brought me a lightness of being at waking up each day without having to worry about the dissertation any longer. The job market was lousy even then, and I applied for dozens of jobs with zero interest from anyone. I did land some fellowship money to go back for more work in Peru and, as Dante

described coming back up from the underworld, to “*riveder le stelle*—to see the stars once more.”

## FIRST BOOKS AND THE TICKING TENURE CLOCK

A senior colleague invited me over for a drink one summer night. It was a nice gesture, although he talked mostly about himself without asking me anything about my work or doings. Was he just not a very reciprocal conversationalist, certainly not unusual for us academics? Or did he know my tenure chances were dimming because I had not yet gotten the necessary book done? I was not sure whether I was paranoid or not to think that he wanted to maintain some distance, the way people do from the condemned.

In fact, I was in trouble. I had lived in Peru for a year, did some academic articles and journalism, and finally got a job at Duke University, my only offer and a place I knew nothing about besides it having a good basketball team. To get tenure at a research university, and by now also at many smaller colleges, you must publish a book. I was four years into my appointment, and, after getting hopelessly stuck in various starts and restarts, I had only some fragmentary chapters. Now my tenure clock was running out. Publish or perish. I had a small child to think about by then, too.

Ahh, our books, the great sacred talismans of our kind! We want to imagine them as about ideas and critical thinking, statements of care and concern, interventions in the world—and they can be all that. But books are not innocent things either, whether ethnographies or any other kind. The invention of the printing process was intimately tied to capitalism’s rise; some historians claim that the book was among the first true capitalist commodity—each one mass-produced on an assembly line, all the same.<sup>15</sup> And, if we can believe Benedict Anderson, print capitalism midwived the nation-state, a style of imagined community that comes with borders, bureaucracies, and wars. A best-seller list dominated by diet plans, celebrity memoirs, and the zillionth biography of George Washington does not inspire great faith in books as a tool for human liberation, even if they survive the incredible shrink-down of written communication to the Twitter feed and text message.

Ethnographies are unusual commodities. They are not worth much sales-wise, since most sell too few copies even to cover production costs, leaving university presses reliant on subsidies and subventions. Instead, an ethnography’s value lies in what it can do for a career. Authoring the hot, attention-grabbing title of the moment is usually monetizable, a coupon for chaired professorships and outside offers with more pay and perks. And getting tenure and its paycheck for life, the customary reward for a first book, is a more precious commodity than ever in the adjunctivizing Hunger Games of the twenty-first-century academy. As much lip service as universities may pay to teaching, mentoring, and so forth, the bottom line is that you’re out if your research doesn’t measure up—and in anthropology, that means a book that passes muster. And out is not a good place to be, with the job market never having been big on second chances and nowadays not even on first ones.

The obstacles to getting that first book done are too often even greater for assistant professors of color. As Tami Navarro, Bianca Williams, and Attiya Ahmad (2013) note, it is no easy trick for any African American, Latinx, or other minority scholars to cope with slights and tokenization, underrepresentation, and the persisting “assumption of a white, male researcher venturing into the unknown as the neutral anthropological position.” The eagerness of white-dominated elite universities to prove their right-thinking diversity bona fides sometimes leads them to hire talented young ABDs of color who are only just finishing their dissertations. That can mean arriving to campus to find yourself swamped by mentoring, committee overload, and finding your place yet still nonetheless expected to have a book done by tenure time. “A setup for failure,” explains Valerie Lambert at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, one of barely more than twenty tenured Native American anthropology professors nationwide. Unsurprisingly, the attrition rate for assistant professors of color is higher than for white ones.

The molasses-drip slowness of the whole process can be enough to drive just about any first-booker over the bend. By the time we are putting last touches on our manuscripts, we have typically been working on the same project for what feels like forever—fieldwork, dissertation, more fieldwork, reconceptualizing, revising. I had done my dissertation fieldwork in the mid-1980s, but I was still trying to get my pathetic book done more than a decade later, completely sick of the peasant movement I was writing about. As years go by, our way of framing the material can become outdated between changes in the places we’re writing about and in theoretical fashions. And even once the manuscript has been submitted, a book takes many months—more often years—getting through review and production and into print. That ethnographies gestate for so long may not be such a bad thing in an age of speed-up and disposability, and yet some mix of guilt, boredom, impatience, and frustration is almost inevitable. In the later stages of a first book, most of us develop a powerful wish to get on to a next project. That imaginary new one, of course, always seems to us so much brighter, shinier, and more important than the real-life book we are stuck trying to finish.

I had a couple of friends who crashed and burned out of tenure-track jobs for failing to get their books done. In the months after that drink with my senior colleague, I had little doubt I would myself soon be searching for another job, since I still had nothing like a finished manuscript with the tenure deadline bearing down. Both my parents gave me love and support, and journalist mother did some heavy editing. The help from my father was indispensable, this the advantage of being a faculty brat. He wrote a key paragraph of the book’s introduction where I had become too unnerved to see any way out.

According to my informal ethnographic snooping, ghostwriting is much more common than some might think. It is no secret that our undergraduates can download a term paper from an online company as easily as ordering an extra-large pepperoni pizza. And various colleagues have told me about writing key passages in the grant proposals of their doctoral students—not just editing, but writing. When their prolonged blocked misery made finishing impossible, I wrote sections of the dissertations for two different advisees, which I

regarded as karmic payback for the help I had from my parents. Increasingly, too, freelance editors offer help getting dissertations and books done, sometimes crossing over from copyediting to writing some text. I recently received a spam email from one such editor: “Dear Orin Starn, Wouldn’t you like to get that writing project off your desk and into the hands of the journal editors or book publisher so you can enjoy the upcoming academic breaks?” Now that I think of it...

The underground ghostwriting economy raises questions about truth, ethics, and equity. What of a dissertation writer with an advisor too lazy or disengaged to give much assistance? An adjunct at a small college without the five or ten thousand dollars to pay for a developmental editor’s guidance in revising their thesis into a book? Or the postdoctoral fellow who feels compelled to go it alone? “I wouldn’t have done it [hired an editor], because of my fear of imposter syndrome, about being labeled a Black woman who couldn’t get it done,” explains one younger African American anthropologist. It took her years, she reports, to get over the “shame and guilt” at having not been able to finish her first book on a fellowship year.

That so much demand exists for help certainly underscores how miserable people can get over a project. Alongside the more surreptitious realities of ghostwriting, the difficulties of the task have led to more public, collective forms of mutual aid. I had a “dissertation buddy,” a fellow graduate student with whom to trade drafts and commiserate, way back in the 1980s. By now these kinds of partnerships have become more common, along with routines like small groups meeting to write together online or in a coffee shop. Local campus writing programs and national organizations like the National Center for Faculty Advancement and Diversity facilitate mentoring relationships, support meetings, and networking connections. Their collectivizing spirit provides a welcome counterpoint to the isolating library cubicle.

Perhaps we should take the cue to rethink the practice of anthropology. As Renato Rosaldo (1993) once described it, the discipline still largely operates by the “lone ethnographer” model, where most of us do our fieldwork and writing on our own. What if we embraced more collaborative ways of working, after the fashion of biology, the earth sciences, or even documentary filmmaking? An example of the possibilities comes from a remarkable group project at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where professors and graduate students worked together to shed light on politics and social inequality across the state.<sup>16</sup> These team-based models may present their own problems of control and hierarchy, and collaboration can go awry.<sup>17</sup> It nonetheless seems odd that we remain trapped in such “on your own” disciplinary habits given how much we like to style ourselves as believers in collective solidarity who have no truck with neoliberal atomization and the fiction of the sovereign individual subject. Our competition with each other for the limited goods of invitations, jobs, and citations does no one any good.

Getting to the end of my tenure book felt like a car crash, blurred in memory. I do recall, at one point, sitting alone on a mountainside and rocking back and forth out of my mind wanting to smash my head against a rock. Just then, Prozac was coming into vogue, and I started taking it, as well as doing some therapy. That made me, officially, yet another subject of what Jackie Orr (2006) calls “psychopower” and

the voracious regime of knowledge, expertise, and regulation that has made categories like anxiety, trauma, and depression into a structuring hermeneutic of modern life. I cut it so close that the book was only in galley when my tenure file went in. Not good, our department chair sighed. He also had trouble finding letter writers because I’d pissed off just about every senior scholar in Andeanist anthropology by publishing an angry-young-man article denouncing the whole field for its Orientalizing sensibilities, which, cleverly stealing from Said, I labeled “Andeanism.” I got tenure, although I didn’t like the book I’d written. I’ve never been able to read any of my books. All I see are the mistakes, and they bring back too many thoughts of how unfun it was to write them.

## HOW NOT TO WRITE A BEST-SELLER

“If you don’t send off the galley, I may leave you,” said my wife, now ex-wife, only slightly hedging the threat: “I’m not saying I will, but I might.” It was doubtless unwise, or at least masochistic, for me to be attempting another book after my experience with the first one. I nonetheless had only to correct the galley to be done with a project about Ishi, the last survivor of a small California Indian tribe, and my search with Native American activists for the truth about his life and death. But I was torn up about releasing what I thought was such a flawed thing into the world, and, in a common-enough practice of neurotic authors not much appreciated by publishers, had been manically trying to rewrite the whole book in the galley. A book can be a homewrecker—an interloper whose greedy demands can damage and sometimes destroy a relationship. My wife was sick of my writing depression, and I felt abandoned. Her threat worked, though. I sent off the galley the next day, despite my sense of defeat and shame about the book.

In the anthropology value-production chain, a second book is typically the cryptocurrency for buying your way from associate to full professor. You would think that the luxury of not writing under the tenure gun would make them easier than first ones, but it does not always work that way. Administrative responsibilities can be a time suck, and so can dallying on the conference circuit, roaming social media, and/or giving more to teaching and advising. Attending to children and aging parents can also take you away from your writing, especially from female faculty who too often bear a disproportionate load of those responsibilities in the decidedly un-post-patriarchal care economy. Promotion to full may not carry the unemployment-line-or-lifetime job import of the tenure sweepstakes. If you remain an associate year after year for not getting a second book done, it can eat at you nonetheless. “Professorial melancholia,” the psychologist David Machell (1989) terms the syndrome of bitterness, insecurity, and disillusionment that afflicts some in later career.

I did not care much about getting promoted. My main trouble this time around was trying to write a trade book. I had always wanted to reach a wider readership, and Ishi’s saga possessed enough built-in drama to attract a willing publisher. A trade press does far bigger runs than a university one, and its books are much more likely to enjoy some visibility in everything from airport bookstores to major newspaper reviews. As much as we may all nod approvingly about more

public-facing anthropology, a certain gendered snobbism has sometimes led “popular” books to be looked down upon as shallow and superficial. One thinks, for example, of Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age of Samoa*, Ruth Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture*, or, for that matter, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Of Mules and Men*. These three brilliant works sold together in the millions, but, exemplifying what Catherine Lutz (2005) calls the “gender of theory,” the more “rigorous,” “scientific,” and “theoretical” writings by supposed great men like A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and E. E. Evans-Pritchard monopolized discussion in the oak-paneled seminar rooms of the great universities.<sup>18</sup> Contrary to the assumption that writing a popular book must be easy enough, I found it much harder than more conventional academic writing. You have to convey complexity without dumbing things down and without the shorthand of our disciplinary jargon. And you must also somehow construct a gripping enough narrative for people to want to buy your book of their own accord. Nobody will be forced to read it, by contrast to a university press ethnography that graduate students must wade through for a seminar, like it or not.

I had little preparation for the task. Our graduate training tends to mean forgetting how to write in plain English to adopt instead the convoluted sentences, insider references, and specialized terminology of academic writing. A 2-1-3 structure? Dropping “gold coins” along the narrative path?<sup>19</sup> I had no idea that so many useful tools even existed for sustaining a compelling story. It felt like I was on very thin ice for being a novice at such a different kind of book.

The nature of my project was fraught, too. As a chronicler of the life and afterlife of Ishi, I was a white anthropologist describing Indian experience, a troubled positionality given our field’s sometimes ugly record with Native peoples. The obligation also weighed heavy to convey the elements of beauty, survival, and human connection to Ishi’s story, and yet also those of cruelty, betrayal, and genocide in my own home state of California. I had donated the first half of my advance from the publisher to Indigenous rights groups. How would I pay back that substantial sum if I could not get the manuscript done? I could not convince myself that the book was a creative challenge rather than an imminent disaster with a probable ugly ending.

It has been said that episodes of depression are worst the second time around for the distress at having the bad feelings return. I had a harder time with the tenure book than with my dissertation, but everything bottomed with the Ishi book. The darkness of the trite, fearful, all-consuming negative thoughts swallowing me up as never before. I could not finish the last chapters, with the press deadline approaching. Desperate, I hired what in the trade world is sometimes called a “book doctor,” somewhere between a developmental editor and a ghostwriter. My book doctor did not write any new text—well, maybe a few sentences—but cut, pasted, and moved things around so as to free me enough to get to the end. I was so turned around that when I sent her my epilogue, which I thought was a dreadful first draft at best, I thought she’d made some mistake when she wrote back to say she wouldn’t change a word. Some readers later told me they thought the epilogue was the best (or only decent?) part of the book. To the last days, I was about to write my editor to withdraw the book and calcu-

lating how to repay my advance. Only the marital threat got the galleys away to press.

For some reason, I had always assumed that writing angst mostly afflicts those of us in the more humanistic fields. Don’t the hard social sciences like economics and political science have the security blanket of statistics, models, and real and sham formulas to clasp tight? One well-known writing-workshop leader, Jennifer Ahern-Dodson, notes that the proximate causes of trouble differ across disciplines—for example, the pressurized, high-stakes demands on clinical researchers to submit one grant proposal after another. But she reports about the same distribution of distress across the humanities, social sciences, hard sciences, and medical research. “About 10 percent get their writing done pretty easily; 80 percent struggle; 10 or 15 percent get dysfunctional.”<sup>20</sup> Having to churn out publications was a factor in the 2017 suicide of political scientist Will Moore. “To feel good about myself—to be able to look myself in the mirror—I needed to produce,” Moore wrote in his suicide note.<sup>21</sup> We anthropologists, in other words, are by no means the only ones to have sometimes serious writing hang-ups. The insecurity, competitiveness, and productivity cult that generate much of our trouble mark just about every field.

Everyone’s experience will always be different. The hard part for some people is just getting to their desks, and indeed some of us will spend endless hours coding and recoding field notes, doing unnecessary additional reading, and finding other reasons for delay. For those tending to depression and anxiety, writing is just one among the spheres of life that can get them feeling really bad, where for me it has been the biggest trigger of mental meltdowns. Whether poems, stories, or her diary, Susan remembers writing as the biggest pleasure of her hardscrabble girlhood. “My mistake was making what I loved into my profession,” she says. It took her years to go back to her desk after her traumatizing time at that mountain cabin. She has been working lately on something about her family and its difficulties, although reports that not being so easy even without the academic pressures: “Maybe writing is so existential because it confronts us with who we are.”

## POT BROWNIES AND WRITER

One night after the Ishi book went to press at last, I collapsed on my way to the bathroom. It felt like hot electricity jolting through my whole body. The paramedics had to ambulance me to the hospital. A surgeon tried to repair the severely ruptured disc in my back.

I’d had back problems for a long time, but never anything like this. As Megan Moodie has noted, a degree of ableism accompanies our assumptions about writing.<sup>22</sup> You cannot write if your body is broken. A dear friend from graduate school, Donald Moore, the author of a fine ethnography about Zimbabwean land politics, was forced to stop for good after a car crash left him in dreadful chronic pain some twenty years ago. And too much time at your desk can itself hasten the body’s destruction, as in the case of my shattered disc. I had spent eighteen-hour days scrunched over my computer in the Ishi book stretch run. That helped to mess up my back badly enough to require five

operations over two years, including a second ambulance trip to the emergency room and medical leave from the university. I shuffled around my apartment with a walker in a stupor of OxyContin and pot brownies, trying to keep the pain at bay.

And then, as I was reduced to a drugged-up semi-invalid, a funny thing happened. For the first time in my professional career, I was able to write without any great unpleasantness. A sex scandal involving golf superstar Tiger Woods was making tabloid headlines, and, as I teach about sports and society, I wrote an op-ed about Woods and the politics of sex, race, and celebrity scandal. It was not bad, so I tried something longer, which became a hundred-page manuscript. I didn't like doing it, but it wasn't painful either, and relatively quick to finish. I was not sure if the manuscript was coherent, written as it was on opioids and pot brownies. But my editor at Duke University Press liked it, and before long it came out as a short book there.

What changed, I wonder still? According to Victoria Nelson (1993, 26), we write best when we allow ourselves an almost child-like freedom to roam and play in the field of language and ideas, "unclenching the muscles of the mind." The habits of discipline and perseverance remain necessary, and, yet, Nelson argues, our creative self chafes at being too aggressively scolded, judged, or commanded to meet real or self-imposed deadlines by our ego command centers. Sometimes it rebels by shutting down altogether, producing writer's block. This theory surely has some truth, perhaps explaining why some of us do our best writing in emails or blog posts. There, we do not bear the weightier obligations of a more formal academic project and thus feel freer to work with words with something like pleasure. Because I was doing the Tiger Woods book between back surgeries, the nasty little demons of fear, anxiety, and recrimination seemed to be too occupied stoking my worries about being left an invalid for life to stir up much trouble about my writing, which cleared space for creation. That dimensions of raunch, absurdity, and the bizarre tempered the ugly racial politics of the Tiger Woods scandal also made it easier for me to write about than the heavy horrors of the Ishi story. And by then I had the advantage of too many years of experience at my desk. Writing well takes twenty years to learn, one plausible-enough estimate has it.

My back worsened in the meantime. As a last resort, after four failed operations at Duke, I went to Sweden for a big double artificial disc replacement operation. That was the single weirdest moment of my life, lying on the operating table in Stockholm about to be put under and realizing that I was half a world from home and my life in the hands of a random surgeon that I'd found on the internet. Miraculously, the operation was a big success, leaving me almost pain-free. I was so happy that I didn't much care any longer, but I wondered if my new and improved relationship to writing would hold, and, again, somewhat to my surprise, I found that it had. I did another book, this the one with my historian friend that got less-than-stellar reviews. The writing was demanding, as it should be, yet mostly without the misery. Having a companion this time was a treat, both for the trips together to Peru and the joint drafting of the manuscript. The experience made me think all over again that it would be much healthier for we anthropologists to work together far more.

## THE WITCHING HOUR

I wake up most nights at 3 or 4 a.m. nowadays. It's the witching hour, the appointed time for lying awake and finding things to worry about. When at my worst with my writing, I would come suddenly to the sickening realization that this or that word was repeated, concept was wrong, or phrasing awkward in whatever I was working on. It was as if—while I slept—one of my little depression goblins was running a diabolical algorithm on my manuscript to find flaws to lay me low. Usually he, she, they, or it was right about the problem. I would lie there in a sweat, or maybe get up to try to fix things. There was no safe haven from my sorry depressive anxiety.

When I woke a few nights ago, I began worrying about this article. That did not last long, however, since writing doesn't get me going like it once did, so I moved on to worrying about my children, my recent cancer diagnosis, and what to make for dinner the next night. Judith Halberstam (2011) describes "the queer art of failure" and the generative possibilities of failing in a society where we're expected to compete, win, and grab the brass ring of happiness and success no matter the cost. For my part, I cannot say I have learned much in the sink pit of writing and depression, mainly just trying not to drown in it. I would not be surprised to get in trouble all over again remembering the Alcoholics Anonymous credo that we are always vulnerable to falling back into our worst pathologies. I take my Wellbutrin every day, among other measures, to try to avoid that.

I wonder about opening up about the topic of writing and depression. There is too much of the Foucauldian in me to assume that it is necessarily always good—much less liberating—to share experiences and name new problems that then require a battery of experts, therapies, and programs to fix. Never one for self-pity or the touchy-feely, Hannah Arendt (1968, 30–31) wanted to maintain what she called the "interspace" between people. She would likely have been appalled by our well-intentioned modern will to create support groups and deepen conversations about every real and imagined problem. We cannot and perhaps should not wish to escape the solitary dimensions of human life.

I do feel bonded with anyone wandering the wilds with a dissertation, book, or some other unfinished text. What to say to you? It may be useful for us all to keep present that much about our writing woes is not so much about us all as it is about the conditions of trying to be an anthropologist today. Because of everything from the complications of dissertation writing to the fragmenting "lone ethnographer" ethos to the pall of anxiety and doubt in the late capitalist air, we are always swimming upstream. Being able to write at all is a privilege in this wounded world of ours, but so many different hazards can wreck the experience. Once I wondered why a lot of published anthropology does not feel all that well-argued, original, or very interesting except to a few specialists. Now I appreciate what it takes just to get something halfway decent done at all.

All this may be of limited comfort if you are stuck. Whatever the bigger structural explanations for your predicament, you still need to get that text done. Try not to go too hard on yourself, even if that is

easier said than done. And although the advice books have it right that showing up at our desks is the *sine qua non* of writing, take time out for anything that might help keep you sane enough to stay the course. That could be yoga, basketball, rock climbing, therapy, pets, self-help books, binge-watching, cutting off your internet, finding a writing partner, joining a writing group, or dropping out of one. The most heartless trick of the depressed mind is convincing us that there is no hope. That's a lie with writing, because the odds are actually in your favor. Most of us do get our work done one way or another, no matter for being lock-down certain we will not. Make no decisions in your worst moments, but there is no shame in letting go if it becomes unbearable. I love fieldwork and just about everything else about anthropology except writing—people, memories, connections. But if I had it to do over, I would probably try something else. Only on my better days can I persuade myself that my middling body of work has been worth the years of self-absorption, isolation, and dread at my desk.

For now, I will likely keep writing, barring relapse into my unfortunate old habits. Is that because writing can bring us closer to knowing Being? My existentialism feels more pedestrian. By now, writing is unavoidably part of who I am—in fact, I don't know how to do much else. My grandfather was a mechanic; he fixed cars. I'm an anthropologist; I write. It should be an exacting craft, not a life-or-death trial by fire.

"Write on. Be careful. Write on. Right on," a friend advises me.

I like that: best to keep spirits up with the darkness always close by.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted in Kaplan (2016, 148).
- <sup>2</sup> I have changed some identifying details for "Susan" besides her name, and she has approved this bit about her.
- <sup>3</sup> A vast literature, of course, exists about anthropology and writing, far too big to summarize here. One useful recent collection about politics, poetics, and experimental ethnography is Pandian and McLean (2017). See also McGranahan (2020) and Starn (2015). Narayan (2012) has given us a thoughtful yet also practical book about ethnographic writing.
- <sup>4</sup> See James (2008) on the ideology of "magical voluntarism" in the neoliberal world.
- <sup>5</sup> My sense is that a sense of vulnerability and shame still keeps many from anthropologists from coming out about the worst of writing trouble. To my knowledge, we have as yet no book quite like literary theorist Ann Cvetkovich's (2012) raw memoir of writer's block, depression, and the academic world. The precariousness of their position makes it especially

hard for graduate students and the untenured from going public. It has become more common, however, to find mention about the misery of writing in blogs and comment sections, for example, in *Savage Minds* and the *American Anthropologist*. Anthropologists of color and those dealing with disabilities have also become increasingly vocal about the difficulties they face in writing and university life (for example, Moodie, n.d.; Navarro, Williams, and Ahmad 2013; Reese 2019). There is also an emergent "slow movement" responding to the speed-up of writing and other demands in the twenty-first-century academy (Berg and Seeber 2016).

- <sup>6</sup> George Orwell, "Why I Write" (1946), [https://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e\\_wiw](https://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e_wiw). See Shah (forthcoming) for a meditation on the politics of writing that takes the Orwell essay as its starting point.
- <sup>7</sup> See Berry et al. (2017), Jobson (2020), and Welcome (2020), among other voices.
- <sup>8</sup> As with "Susan," I have changed some identifying details for "Olga," and she has approved the text.
- <sup>9</sup> See the statistics from the National Institute for Mental Health: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression>.
- <sup>10</sup> Mark Fisher, "Why Mental Health is a Political Issue," July 12, 2012, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/16/mental-health-political-issue>.
- <sup>11</sup> Mark Fisher, "Good for Nothing," March 19, 2014, *The Occupied Times*, <https://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=12841>. His *Capitalism Realism* (Fisher 2009) offers a larger analysis of life and its difficulties under capitalism. Fisher battled depression for years, and took his own life in 2017.
- <sup>12</sup> "Anthropology Prof. Gary Urton Abused Power during Sexual Advance toward Student in 2012, University Investigation Finds," August 28, 2020, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2020/8/28/gary-urton-odr-complaint-conclusion/>.
- <sup>13</sup> See also Greene (2017).
- <sup>14</sup> Anthropologist Nilgün Uygun (personal communication) elaborates on the idea of the book as a commodity fetish: "The written word stands in for and masks all the "social" labor of thinking/human communication/relations."
- <sup>15</sup> See Seymour (2019, 22).
- <sup>16</sup> No less than seven professors and doctoral students coauthored the book resulting from this NSF-funded project (Holland et al. 2007). Many of those involved also went on to publish their own fine books growing from that original collaborative endeavor.
- <sup>17</sup> As an example of team-based research gone awry, see Leighton's (2020) trenchant analysis of "performative informality" in gender and class hierarchies in Andeanist archaeology.
- <sup>18</sup> As various feminist critics noted (for example, Behar and Gordon 2005), the pattern of connecting high theory to maleness and insubstantial "popularizing" artiness to femaleness also troubled the debates about reflexivity and representation of the 1980s. The mostly male (and mostly white) *Writing Culture* cohort drew much attention for deconstructing old monological ethnographic conventions with less credit given to books like Elenore Smith Bowen's *Return to Laughter* or Jean Briggs's *Never in Anger* that had experimented with dialogic, embodied forms of writing many years before. A leading figure in the *Writing Culture* movement, the sharp-sighted James Clifford, has been quick to agree that not enough credit went to these earlier and often female experimenters.
- <sup>19</sup> A valuable handbook for nonfiction writing is Clark (2006).
- <sup>20</sup> One therapist I spoke with does report seeing slightly more clients with writing-related depression from the humanities, although many from all fields. He claims that journalists are the most immune to bad trouble getting their writing done.
- <sup>21</sup> His note appears at <https://willopines.wordpress.com/2017/04/19/punched-out/>. A forum at the blog Duck of Minerva offers moving thoughts about Moore's death and academic pressures.
- <sup>22</sup> Megan Moodie, "Autoethnography, Undone: A Critique of Realism in Anthropology," unpublished ms. See Dolmage (2017) and Kerschbaum (2014) for more about disability, normativity, and the writing process.

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