Writing Culture

and the

Life of Anthropology

ORIN STARN, *editor*

WRITING CULTURE AND THE LIFE OF ANTHROPOLOGY

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For Ken

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INTRODUCTION

Orin Starn

"It's a trap," Eminem warns us against dwelling too much in the past. "Fuck my last CD that shits in the trash."[1]

It's hard to disagree altogether with the aging hip-hop megastar. Our modern pieties enshrine remembering as our moral duty and a therapeutic necessity for individuals and nations alike. But sometimes, as others before Eminem have also suggested, forgetting may not be such a bad thing. Nietzsche claimed cows are happier than people because they can't remember anything that happened more than a few minutes before.

Then again, it may not be wise to take cows entirely for our model. We anthropologists, when we do bother to look back, sometimes lean on canned histories about complicity with colonialism and other real and imagined disciplinary failings. Our tendency is to adopt an almost childish enchantment with the latest trendy theories, theorists, and topics. It's a mark of vitality, and yet it can also leave one puzzling over just what waters the patched-up schooner of anthropology has crossed and where it may be headed next.

This collection is about anthropology's past, present, and possible future ports of call. A spirit of retrospection, *pace* Marshall Mathers, gave rise to the project in the first place. In 1986, the year of Halley's comet and the first IBM laptop, perhaps the single most influential anthropology book in recent decades appeared: *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography.* As the twenty-fifth anniversary of the book's publication neared (and, as these things do, soon passed), it provided an occasion for inviting the editors, George Marcus and James Clifford, and a group of leading anthropologists to offer their thoughts about the book and its legacies.[2] Their by turns wistful, optimistic, elusive, fragmentary, programmatic, and provocative essays about the field then and now come together in this book.

It's striking just how much anthropology has changed in just a few short decades. Our former fixation on those proverbial exotic tribal societies has given way to a brave new disciplinary world where just about anything anywhere has become fair ethnographic game. We may still work in archetypal anthropological stomping grounds like New Guinea and the Amazon (though with angles of inquiry very different from our disciplinary ancestors), but just as likely now in San Francisco BDSM dungeons, French magic clubs, or Brazil's plastic surgery wards.[3] And too we are no longer the stereotypical white male preserve of an older scientific day. If anthropology early on had its pioneering female luminaries, many more women and people of color and from the Third World have now entered the ranks, albeit too often still facing unpleasant obstacles of various kinds.[4] There has also been the ever-changing medley of sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting theoretical trends: Marxism and feminism in varied versions; the many stripes of poststructuralist and postcolonial theory; the interest in sovereignty and governmentality; Foucault, Agamben, Butler, Latour, Deleuze . . . and who knows what next.

Any attempt to reckon with these disciplinary changes should surely include *Writing Culture*. As a graduate student in the 1980s, I can testify to the book's big splash in our modest pond of a discipline. *Writing Culture* was the flagship text for the debates about reflexivity and representation that defined that whole decade in anthropology, or the "writing culture" moment, as some still call it. You simply had to read—and have an opinion about—the book unless you wanted to appear pathetically behind the times, which is never a good plan for a graduate student. (The middle-aged tenured professor, alas, can and sometimes does get away with it since we can't be fired—yet.)

Those opinions were quite radically polarized. Neither George Marcus nor James Clifford ever identified as a "postmodernist." That did not keep some critics from branding the two *Writing Culture* editors as the ringleaders of a sinister "postmodern movement." Along with Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer's *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986), Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), and other influential new texts, the essays in *Writing Culture* seemed to threaten the traditional bedrock principles of truth, science, and objectivity with the relativizing epistemic murk of newfangled literary theory and other suspect influences.[5] Then, as now, job interviews at AAA meetings were conducted in those horrible little curtained booths at the convention hotel. You had to be ready to discuss your position on postmodernism as if it were self-evident what that notoriously slippery and by now antique-sounding term meant, let alone that one had to be "for"

or "against" it. It sometimes felt, if you gave the wrong answer, as though someone might push the button to the trap door under your chair.

Why did *Writing Culture* generate such controversy? After all, others had already called for radically rethinking anthropology amid the turmoil of decolonization and social protest across the late 1960s and 1970s. A pair of earlier landmark anthologies, *Reinventing Anthropology* and *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, had been especially influential in opening the discipline to serious scrutiny.[6] The rising influence of Marxist and feminist theory, also predating *Writing Culture*, had gone along with a new concern for the nexus of culture, power, and history together with a more politicized anthropology.

Much about *Writing Culture* indeed bore the imprint of 1960s radicalism. The contributors were mostly baby boomers who had marched against the Vietnam War and been influenced by that era's countercultural currents. An antiracist, anticolonial sympathy for the subaltern ran through the book. What *Writing Culture* added to the mix were the new sensibilities of literary, poststructuralist, and postcolonial theory in various guises. The anthology's essays were by no means uniform in their agendas. Still, the citation of such otherwise disparate bedfellows as Derrida, Bakhtin, Baudrillard, Foucault, Frye, White, Barthes, and Said marked the growing interest in the politics of discourse, language, and representation that was to define so much inquiry in anthropology and related fields to the twentieth century's close and into the new century. As Clifford (this volume) observes in hindsight, *Writing Culture* occupied a "transitional moment," somewhere between the agendas and interests of the late 1960s and those of the fin de siècle.

Especially irksome to some critics was the new concern for reflexivity and representation. Treating ethnography not as a transparent record of other realities so much as a genre of writing with its own conventions, tropes, gaps, and silences was little more than self-indulgent navel gazing in one quite common view. And then there was the anthology's tilt to a postmodern, if one may be excused the hollowed-out word, skepticism about neat explanation and model building as against a more mobile, open-ended view of culture and society as a terrain of hybridization, disjuncture, and heteroglossia. Not only old school positivists found such tendencies objectionable and worse. Censorious criticism also came from the left, especially Marxist and feminist scholars. The Marxian-minded Nicole Polier and William Roseberry, for example, lamented that *Writing Culture* strayed too far from the ostensibly solid ground of political economy into the treacherous badlands of a depoliticized, la-la-land culturalism.[7] Feminists objected, reasonably enough,

to there being only one woman, Mary Pratt, among *Writing Culture*'s nine contributors; they also faulted Clifford and Marcus for failing to acknowledge feminist genealogies of ethnographic experimentation and textual theorization.[8] To the harshest critics, the postmodern turn of the 1980s was a step backward, a rear-guard action that threatened to undercut hopes for a transformed anthropology. Many would have been pleased enough to see *Writing Culture* consigned to Eminem's waiting trash can without further ceremony.

All the controversy only increased interest in *Writing Culture*. The book was a touchstone, even inspiration for its admirers, especially among a younger generation then coming up through the ranks. As John Jackson Jr. (this volume) remembers it, *Writing Culture* seemed to give us "license . . . for thinking unabashedly" about the craft of ethnography and, more broadly, the state of anthropology as a whole. The verve, intelligence, and originality of the contributions only added to the sense of something very different from the usual plodding academic anthology. *Writing Culture* found readers in literature, history, visual studies, and other fields, and beyond the United States. (It has been translated into Mandarin and four other languages.) Several hundred Google Scholar citations is one modern measure of an influential academic text; *Writing Culture* has been cited 8,638 times and counting.

This volume's opening essays furnish new ways to think about *Writing Culture* and the already almost exotically different times to which it belonged. If the book was bright and shiny in its moment, all of us—even the brainy kids in the class like the *Writing Culture* contributors—find ourselves dated by time's passing sooner or later. We are left, as Clifford puts it (this volume), "feeling historical." A master historicizer (and, it is sometimes forgotten, a historian and not an anthropologist by training), Clifford points to the enormous planetary transformations since *Writing Culture*'s publication: the cold war's end; the Internet and its consequences, overhyped and not; intensifying global interconnections and disjunctures; and too many more developments to name. Those changes make it impossible any longer, at least for Clifford, to maintain a tone of "confident, knowing critique." Instead Clifford wonders at a new world whose multiple centers, massive inequalities, and ever more unsustainable ecology make so precarious the future of the planet itself, not to mention that of our humble discipline.

It's the dizzying journey from then to now that preoccupies Michael Fischer in his essay. He offers reflections about anthropology and the world

at three moments: 1984 (the year *Writing Culture* was actually compiled), 1999, and 2013. Along the way Fischer, an original *Writing Culture* contributor and intellectual whirling dervish, probes the cultural politics of fast-changing Asian cites, Iranian film, Bihari folk music, and more. He is unwilling to emplot his account through tropes of either progress or decline, underscoring instead that the "arrow of time does not move uniformly." He does see a role still for anthropology. Our "jeweler-eye craftsmanship in teasing out the refractions of everyday life," he insists, can sometimes "upset the echo-chamber master narratives, or aggregating voice, of politicians, political scientists, economists, and the mass media."

There's much else to be said about *Writing Culture*'s place in our disciplinary trajectory. A leading house historian of anthropology, Richard Handler, sets the postmodern turn of the 1980s within the field's changing sociology. Anthropology was a modest family affair back in the early days of Boas and his students. A few hundred people was a good annual meeting turnout. By contrast, anthropology expanded rapidly in American higher education's post–World War II boom. "We have grown," the field's doyenne, Margaret Mead, already wrote in 1973, "into a group of tremendous milling crowds, meeting in large hotels where there are so many sessions that people do well to find their colleagues who are interested in their same specialty." Those who now lament our "overspecialization," as Handler (this volume) notes, ignore that growth, with its accompanying fragmentation and diversification, is an expectable "function of normal science in a bureaucratized world." But these plural pathways do undercut the simple disciplinary periodizations that we like to invent to tidy up history's messiness. A closer look back at the 1980s—and Handler rereads the 1982 *Annual Review of Anthropology* to this end—recalls how much else was going on back then. The turn to reflexivity and representation headlined by *Writing Culture*, as strong as its imprint across the field, was hardly the only game in town. Some new developments proved dead ends; others, and Handler cites the example of the emerging interest in the anthropology of Europe, proved to have disciplinary legs of their own.

But what about anthropology now? The bulk of the essays here use *Writing Culture* as a launching point for thinking about the discipline today. One main concern revolves around that most canonical disciplinary mainstay, fieldwork. It's not exactly evident, besides out of habit and perhaps some

science envy, why we still use this peculiar term that makes our research sound like a biology expedition to count baboons in a game preserve.[9] Nor, as various critics have noted, is it ever clear just where "the field" begins or ends in a shrunken world where nothing now stands, or perhaps ever has, more than a few degrees of separation from anything else.[10] All this said, the premise that fieldwork is our distinguishing bedrock remains as powerful as ever a century now since its original mythical charter in Malinowski's sweaty, disgruntled, libidinous Trobriand tenting. Most undergraduate as well as graduate anthropology programs have some required methods course. Others beyond the discipline, and sometimes the university, have even been poaching fieldwork to their own ends. It enjoys a certain fashionability among market researchers, political strategists, global health specialists, and other lost souls searching for something beyond the census numbers and online questionnaires.

Just what we learn in the field is not always so obvious. We assume that knowledge accrues in proportion to time spent in a place. But is this always so? Michael Taussig (this volume) points out that "first impressions are generally more vivid than subsequent ones." If you believe Malcolm Gladwell's best-selling *Blink*, then snap judgments may be more trustworthy than what we think we have learned after much study. We ourselves in our ethnographies like to tell self-deprecating fieldwork tales about confidence shattered—about the interview, encounter, or faux pas that forced us to see how our original assumptions were all wrong. These tales function to assure readers and ourselves that we really did gain some real insight in the end. (And, personally, I think you do learn more from sustained ethnographic engagement than any snap judgment or, for that matter, running algorithms on survey data from the safe remove of your university office.) In reality, of course, we're always partial prisoners of the ways we've been trained to see, no matter how much we want to flatter ourselves on our open-mindedness. What anthropologists "discover" in the field inevitably refracts, often mirrors, the discipline's agendas of the moment—"resistance" when that fascinated us, "governmentality" in its window, and so forth. Our newer tendency to emphasize that what we have learned is always fragmentary and incomplete—and shadowed by what Juan Obarrio, channeling Derrida, terms an unknowable "remainder"—is itself an overdetermined product of chastened post–*Writing Culture* sensibilities with a dash of newer high-theory complaint about the supposed tyranny of order.[11] Our fieldwork is always caught somewhere in between all too predictable discoveries and mo-

ments of something like genuine learning and sometimes even revelation. The trouble is that we're not always able to tell just which is which.

Kamala Visweswaran considers fieldwork's perils and possibilities in her contribution. An influential interlocutor in debates around feminist ethnography, Visweswaran relates how researching that most terrible of categories, genocide, has led her to see how "the field itself, . . . and our perception of it, shifts over time." If her work began with Hindus killing Muslims in Gujarat, it then took her elsewhere in South Asia, and then "inevitably back home," to Hurricane Katrina's devastation and the Iraq war. She coins "fieldnoting" by way of counseling mindfulness to the changing contexts of our efforts to decipher the world. Thus Visweswaran, on returning to this country, found her thinking going in new directions in reaction to the mainstream media's peculiar 24/7 brew of sensationalism, shallowness, and silence about some forms of human suffering. Her fieldnoting does not necessarily mean writing anything down. It does entail trying to remain alert to the forces both personal and not that so often change our own sense of what matters across a research project's long life.

We also face many new questions about fieldwork. Take, for example, the fact that multilocale research to track life in an interconnected world has become virtual orthodoxy by now. How do we pull this off without becoming spread so thin as to lose the intimacy of sustained ethnographic engagement that remains fieldwork's highest promise in the first place? And what does it mean for our fieldwork that so many of us now seem to be "natives" or at least "halfies" to the cultures we study, as opposed to an older day's proverbial outsiders? If fieldwork, as Sherry Ortner once defined it, is "the attempt to view other systems from the ground level," then what for that matter is the "ground" anymore?[12] After all, this age of cloud computing, the satellite, and so much traffic between the real and the simulated can make it unclear just where reality's terra firma begins, or, if Baudrillard had it right, whether any such thing exists any longer or perhaps ever did. How, more concretely, does one do the ethnography of Internet chat rooms, social media, or dotcom dating?[13] And what about new collaborative projects and other such experimental forms of research design?[14] There's never any shortage of things to discuss in those research methods classes.

The problem of writing lay, as the title had it, at the core of *Writing Culture*. Almost three decades later the poetics and politics of ethnography continue

to be matters of much disciplinary discussion, and sometimes disagreement. As with fieldwork, the very word *ethnography* is clunky and dated, like a balky old power mower that works just well enough for us to keep on using it in spite of ourselves. Do any of us really imagine that what we write is about the "ethos" of those we study: the spirit of a *Volk*, that unfortunate Herderian fiction for dividing us humans into nations and peoples as if we had little else but anatomy in common? As Marcus underscores, the *graph* in *ethnography* has its own dimensions of anachronism. After all, the very idea of writing, at least anything more than a text or tweet, can seem old-fashioned now in the age of multimedia, streaming video and the avalanche of other digitized communication. It's a challenge to sell books at all nowadays, as any publisher will lament, other than the latest from some self-help guru, a famous movie star or politician's autobiography, or, of course, that celebrity chef's newest cookbook.

Growingly blurred boundaries of genre and expertise have made everything even trickier. As evidenced in wildly successful books like Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* and Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, some journalists and other creative class writers have become, for lack of a better word, more "anthropological."[15] Much like us, they will go off somewhere, immerse themselves in local life in something akin to fieldwork, and then report back about what they've witnessed. We may have our quibbles with these books, but, unfortunately for us, they are often very well written and garner the reviews in the *New York Times*, radio and Internet attention, and big readerships that anthropologists seldom do. They sometimes end up on our syllabi, replacing writing by our colleagues. For that matter, you can now, as Fischer (this volume) underscores, find fiction that illuminates matters of culture and politics as well as or sometimes better than we do. What better book, for example, about colonialism's complexities than Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (though one would like to think that his anthropology training has something to do with that)? Or about contemporary Native American experience than almost anything by the Coeur D'Alene writer Sherman Alexie? And then there's the whole genre of memoirs by West African child soldiers, Latin American indigenous activists, and many more. Here postcolonials have their own say as opposed to being ventriloquized by the anthropologist. We had something of a monopoly, in the old days, over writing about people in out-of-the-way places. Now we don't have much of a franchise in anything at all.

Sales figures make the point in a cold way. An ethnography's typical print run is a thousand copies, tiny by trade press standards; the book is deemed successful if it sells all those. The only time we do much better is not because anyone chooses to read our books but through classroom adoptions, a form of forced consumption. As for our journal articles, they circulate among other graduate students and faculty with an interest in the topic, seldom farther. There's been experimentation aplenty with ethnographic form in the post–*Writing Culture* age, and for that matter before that. And lately there has been much talk about public anthropology to reach beyond the academy.[16] None of this seems to have much widened our readership. In the department of excuse making, we sometimes say that our books don't do well because they're too complex. This seems a dubious argument. After all, the likes of Boo, Ghosh, and Alexie produce nuanced work that still sells in big numbers. One also hears it said, as if we deserved a pat for daring truth-telling, that we don't have more readers because the politics of what we write is too radical for the mainstream. This isn't very plausible either. Being something other than an apologist for the status quo hasn't kept other intellectuals as varied in their views as Noam Chomsky, Judith Butler, Fredric Jameson, Leo Strauss, and Allan Bloom from gaining healthy readerships. Our sales shortcomings have more to do with other factors. We tend not to be very good storytellers, partly because we have no real training in this particular skill (and perhaps because we'd be novelists in the first place if we had much writing talent). We employ specialized trade jargon, sometimes more to sound smart than because it's really necessary to communicate our ideas. And then there's the increased competition in the crowded creative nonfiction market.

For all this, ethnography remains very much alive and even well in its modest way. Part of this has to do with the sociology of the profession. As Jurassic a medium as print may be, the journal article and the book remain the gold standard for hiring and promotion. We do hear ritualized talk from college administrators about reworking standards to value more highly teaching, filmmaking, community activism, and other work. And Fischer has described the emergence of so-called third spaces like studios, archives, and installations, many of them enabled by new technologies of various kinds.[17] Even so, it's still just about impossible to get tenure at a major research university—and sometimes also at liberal arts colleges—if you haven't published a book. That book is supposed to be an ethnography, with the collected

essays, textbooks, mystery novels, and theory manifestos saved for later. As for university and other academic presses, they know that anthropology will not fix their own precarious bottom line, but ethnographies often do better than, say, the unfortunate likes of classical studies and French history. If anything, anthropology lists have grown in recent years (and Duke University Press is a noteworthy example). Ethnography, in short, is not an endangered genre no matter that we already seem to be moving toward reading books of all kinds more often on screens than on paper. While we might wish to reach bigger readerships, it's also true enough that sales is only one index of value. A need remains for the up-close, deeply engaged yet theoretically savvy view of things that good ethnography can provide as against the scary superficiality of so much sound-bite punditry and willed ignorance about the world.

It's actually an exciting time for ethnography in many ways. Like the study of kinship, spirituality and religion, or even play, we've seen the reinvigoration of traditional areas of ethnographic investigation from altogether new angles. Then again, the freeing of anthropology from its obsession with the primitive has allowed for the development of whole new areas of study: science and technology, of course, and yet also finance, bureaucracy, humanitarianism, environmental politics, sports, social media, and many other, often overlapping endeavors. There's historical ethnography that traces far-reaching patterns of flux and interconnection across centuries. And, be it African immigration to Norway or the Israeli Army's use of social media, we have much writing now about the new—yet another sea change for a discipline that didn't always pay much attention to history, change, or invention at all.[18] Marcus (this volume), ever the astute and sometimes visionary trend-spotter, suggests that "the temporality of emergence, of the contemporary (as the just past and the near future) defines as much if not more the mise-en-scène of many ethnographic projects today than the traditional distinctive space or site."

A number of this volume's essays take up the question of ethnographic writing for these new times. Kathleen Stewart asks (this volume) with characteristic inventiveness whether we can ever step "outside the cold comfort zone of recognizing only self-identical objects." According to Stewart, the very attempt requires a "reattuning" so as to "register the tactility and significance of something coming into form through an assemblage of affects, routes, conditions, sensibilities, and habits." Her own concern lies in the problem of precarity from her New England hometown, a Texas swimming hole, and the American road to her mother's decline. It's a question, as Stewart puts

it, of trying to evoke "how things are hanging together or falling apart." She points to *Writing Culture*'s role in helping to clear "a field for an attention to emergent forms." Her own experimentation with timbre, form, and style has made its mark across anthropology and beyond. The line between anthropology, autobiography, poetry, theory, and observation blurs, sometimes melts away, in Stewart's essay here, as in so much of her other writing.

The ethnography of precariousness also concerns Anne Allison in her contribution. Allison wrote her first book, a feminist anthropology classic, about a Tokyo club where businessmen went to be fawned over by sexy young hostesses. As she describes it, *Nightwork* was still partly in the single-locale ethnographic tradition, albeit one very different from the picturesque rural villages of an older Japanese anthropology. There is surely even now sometimes a place for ethnography focused on a single site. But Allison's desire to decipher the post-bubble Japanese predicament led her to research that was "scattered rather than schematic and driven more by a sensing." She found that precarity itself, whether among Tokyo seniors or refugees from Fukushima's flooded radioactive devastation, proved often "beyond words" and to "def[y] groundedness" by its very elusive ubiquity. The resulting mobile ethnography of her moving essay here works through the vignette, the snapshot, and the chance encounter to evoke a Japan that juxtaposes the pain of unrealized longing against brave yet scattered attempts to fashion new forms of human connection.

That anthropologists can write, now, about Kyoto suicide prevention centers and Las Vegas strip malls measures the discipline's reinvention of itself to studying just about anything. But what about those ethnographers still working in the far-flung corners of the Third World that so obsessed anthropology in an earlier era? Africa, of course, ranked high among those archetypal areas, and no topic was more canonical than the investigation of African kinship systems. In his contribution Charles Piot returns to this sacred old subject but in the new post–cold war context of the scramble for exit visas and the hope for a better life abroad. Here Piot, a leading anthropologist of West Africa, shows how the U.S. visa lottery has led entrepreneurial Togolese to develop a creative cottage industry in fake marriages and invented relatives. In some ways, as he shows, the flexible, improvisational quality of fictive consular kinship politics is of a piece with everyday kin relations in Togo. But Piot also underscores its dimensions of newness, among other things the role of staged marriage videos and DNA testing surprises in the mix. If anthropology once helped to invent the fiction of unchanging

primitive traditions, it's the opposite now. Like other Africanist anthropologists in more recent decades, Piot wants us to understand that life is everywhere in motion. He notes that the strangeness of visa lottery fakery is all too familiar in an age of product piracy, Wall Street Ponzi schemes, and the trampled border between the real and the fake. All of us, he insists, "traffic in nontransparent or compromised identities these days."

Writing Culture aimed to denaturalize ethnography by opening to scrutiny its history, politics, and conventions. Even now, however, an enduring disciplinary habit remains to presume a divide between field notes, typically unpublished, and the resulting ethnography, the great fetish of the finished book. Michael Taussig (this volume), who has set such a high-wire standard for original writing and thought across his career, wonders "if anthropology has sold itself short in conforming to the idea that its main vehicle of expression is an academic book or a journal article." He speaks in praise of the humble field notebook (no matter that it may nowadays be a tablet or laptop). Our notebook, Taussig suggests, "captures ephemeral realities, the check and bluff of life" in ways that our more formal published ethnography sometimes fails to do. It may indeed be the promise of the new collaborative multimedia formats—an instance of anthropology's emerging third spaces—to allow for other ways of doing things. To take just one example, the Asthma Files project, developed by Kim Fortun and Mike Fortun, brings together stray commentary, blog posts, articles, and more by anthropologists, epidemiologists, policy makers, and patients themselves. It crosses old boundaries of expertise, genre, and format through open threads of exchange and debate that stand in contrast to the printed book's dimensions of irrevocability and closure.

No longer does ethnography even focus only on our domineering species, as it did a few decades ago. We now have multispecies and cyborg brands of inquiry that seek to show for a fiction any ontology that would imagine the human, the animals, and the machine as separate spheres of being in the first place. Here dogs, magnetic resonance imaging, chickens, space rockets, and genetically engineered mice become the objects of a post-anthropocentric anthropology that probes the history and politics of our entanglements with other life forms. In his contribution Hugh Raffles, that rare anthropologist who has also had notable success as a trade author, presents us with a historical, cross-cultural exercise in the ethnography of stone. This requires radically reimagining scale and depth to grope our way back into the telluric reaches of geologic time. "In its stillness and its resonance," Raffles writes,

stone "pulls us vertiginously into this vastness." The pocked sea rock he finds on an Oregon beach provincializes human existence in its juxtaposition to our relative newcomerness to planetary history and the ever more real possibility that we myopic, destructive beings will not even be around that much longer.

"We don't need a lot more anthropologists in the state," Florida's governor Rick Scott told reporters a few years ago, as if we were just a grade above cockroaches or some other household pest. The attempted retooling of higher education to align with the supposed necessities of cost cutting, job training, and market principles has put the liberal arts as a whole on the defensive. A proud anti-intellectualism, of course, is nothing new in America, and the Culture Wars demonology that paints anthropology, English, and other departments as nests of evil, politically correct drones still flourishes in conservative and other circles. These less than fuzzy feelings about us have now been hitched to the postfordist business model that makes such a mantra of downsizing, depoliticizing, outsourcing, and computerizing everything possible. The dearth of stable tenure-track positions has created a whole large class of subemployed adjuncts who suffer through bad pay, the slights of second-class university citizenship, and a demoralizing uncertainty about their future prospects. No wonder the defenders of anthropology and the other liberal arts have rushed to the barricades with statements, conferences, and reports to rebut the latest attacks.

Our modest field has managed to hang on in any event. There's little growth in anthropology or across the humanities. Here at Duke we graduate about twenty-five majors a year, as compared with several hundred in neuroscience and a small army in economics. It's the business, medical, law, and engineering schools that build the fancy big new glass buildings at universities everywhere. Yet the numbers of anthropology majors, Ph.D. students, and faculty have not declined but have grown some over the past decade. For better or worse, too, the promise of ethnography's more intimate understanding has attracted new patrons: corporations wanting better information about how to design and sell their products and, controversially, an American military seeking to learn more about the "human terrain" where it fights. The U.S. government and Microsoft are now reportedly the two biggest employers of anthropologists.[19] Scott, the unfriendly Florida governor, helped in 2009 to abolish the anthropology major at Florida State University. It

has since been resuscitated there as against dark predictions that what happened in Tallahassee augured the shuttering of anthropology departments nationwide.

Why do we defend anthropology, besides the small matter of its being our chosen career? We tell prospective majors that the discipline will give them a valuable perspective on matters like diversity and multiculturalism, race and gender, globalization, and much more. That's all true enough; so are the clichés about the benefits of a liberal arts education. As to our political leanings, it's also true that one is more likely to run across an anteater in a shopping mall than a Republican anthropologist. It might not be a bad thing for us to have some greater diversity of political opinion within the ranks, or at least more than just the present span from left of center to some version of far left. But most of us do not try to sway students to any particular view, and it's not as if the warriors of the right wing don't get plenty of hearing in this benighted America of Rush Limbaugh and Fox News. If we really were hatching some sinister subversive plot against motherhood and apple pie, I'm not sure their defenders would have much to worry about anyway. Our modest numbers, shrunken departmental budgets, and proclivity for yoga, organic produce, and Priuses do not make for a very fearsome strike force.

Anthropologists cannot always agree on much anyway. Every field features what the feminist theorist Robyn Wiegman terms "object dramas," namely one or more key concepts that define, fixate, and vex that particular discipline.[20] The concept of culture has, clearly, been a prime drama object in anthropology. There have been endless attempts to pin it down once and for all, and, of course, they always fail. *Writing Culture* belonged to a moment of critique of the very idea of culture for seeming to suggest that a changing, interconnected world divides into fixed, bounded, homogeneous units, including calls to "write against" it.[21] Some of us tend now to avoid the noun for these problematic associations and yet continue to use the adjective cultural, which is really just a semantic evasion. Other anthropologists still speak about "American culture," "Japanese culture," or "Hopi culture" in more traditional fashion. There are always, meanwhile, new permutations of very old debates about the relationship between culture, economy, and society, however they may be defined. Much scholarship now also tracks the social life of the culture concept, namely its circulation beyond anthropology into fierce, sometimes bloody struggles over migration, nationhood, heritage, education, and the politics of exclusion and belonging. It's perhaps unsurprising that the lack of consensus would be so pronounced in a field

whose ultimate objects of study, people, are so very different, contradictory, and changeable in the first place.

Anthropologists have always wanted to imagine a moral mission to their enterprise. For all the familiar and sometimes justified latter-day criticism, the likes of Boas, Mead, and Benedict and, across the Atlantic, Evans-Pritchard and Malinowski saw their would-be scientific findings in the laboratory of faraway cultures as countering stereotypes of primitive backwardness, at times even offering models for the West's own improvement. Their scholarship, more than we sometimes credit, advanced the then quite novel causes of racial equality and cross-cultural understanding. But the upheavals of the late 1960s and 1970s brought a more aggressively politicized style of being an anthropologist. As questioning of the very ideology of scientific objectivity found reinforcement in currents of feminist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial theory, calls sounded for an "activist," "militant," "barefoot," or, more recently, "public" or "anarchist" anthropology. Decoding racial, gendered, sexual, national, or capitalist formations of inequality became the biggest disciplinary fulcrum. By the end of the twentieth century it sometimes seemed as if every ethnography had politics or at least power in its title. Anthropologists, according to the new ethnographic self-fashioning, almost always positioned themselves in implicit or explicit alignment with the marginalized, the excluded, and the oppressed. Both our theoretical lenses and the objects of inquiry may have changed, all the way from resistance and social movements in the 1980s to neoliberalism, citizenship, and sovereignty at this century's beginning and, more recently, precarity and the politics of affect and hope. But the idea that anthropology can or even, as the more policing would have it, must contribute to the struggle against injustice remains powerful in our disciplinary ethos.

Kim Fortun makes a strong case for anthropology's potential contribution in her essay. A role remains, Fortun believes, for critiquing the actually existing order of things. Her own fine ethnography of the Bhopal disaster was a compelling examination of the intertwined stories of victims, lawyers, Union Carbide executives, and environmental activists in the aftermath of that outsized late industrial tragedy. Now, however, Fortun wants us to recognize that ethnography may also be a means for eliciting "the future anterior," a "space of creativity, where something surprising, something new to all emerges." This means designing forms of research that makes "hesitations and shifts" into an opening for generating "something that could not be said, could not be brought together before." Here the product of an ethnographer's labors may be a

website, a digital archive, or perhaps a series of conversations, and not necessarily a more traditional ethnography at all. The multimedia, cross-professional, transnational Asthma Files project exemplifies just such an endeavor. Fortun cites as well recent ethnographic efforts to bring together convenience store chain executives, industrial designers, and locavore critics of the farm-industrial system to reconsider the politics and economy of food. The larger hope, she concludes, is for ethnography that "becomes creative—setting language games in motion, provoking different orderings of things, having patience for what we cannot yet imagine."

In her essay Danilyn Rutherford also advocates a retooled anthropology. Rutherford, who finds inspiration in David Hume's concepts of circumstance and sympathy, coins the label *kinky empiricism* to describe her agenda. This would entail a supple yet conjoined commitment to the empirical and the ethical that eschews the false guarantees of analytical closure much less moral certitude. Well known for her own first-class scholarship about Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, Rutherford remains alert to ambiguity and contradiction in good *Writing Culture* fashion. But she, no more than Fortun, does not wish to wallow in what David Chioni Moore calls "anthro(a)pology" for our disciplinary shortcomings.[22] "Even though we are aware of the partiality of our truths," she paraphrases Hume, "we still must act." Her essay makes its own strong case for an anthropology that might matter for the better in a dangerous, divided world.

Our scramble for the would-be moral and political high ground has shaped major disciplinary developments in the long shadow of the 1960s. Among the most notable has been claiming expertise over what Joel Robbins terms the "suffering slot."[23] Here the anthropologist brings back stories of pain, violence, and misery to throw into relief the world's terrifying injustices. This merging of ethnographic witnessing, moral crusade, and social analysis has been pressed by some of the era's most influential anthropologists, among them Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Veena Das, and, the closest thing we have to a celebrity, Paul Farmer.[24] The resulting work can sometimes, through little fault of its own, play into the condescending old conceit that poor, brown-skinned people can be rescued only by enlightened Westerners, an ideology recycled yet again in elements of the student humanitarianism boom of recent years. But this anthropology's embrace of responsibility for the suffering slot very self-consciously reverses the old-school disciplinary tendency to ignore the human costs of war, conquest, and poverty. Even as Boas and his students in America dedicated themselves to salvaging a record

of supposedly vanishing native traditions, they did little, as so many critics have noted by now, to document white colonialism's devastation, much less try to stop it. Alfred Kroeber, who led the UC Berkeley department for almost half a century, once was asked why he never wrote about the brutal treatment of the Yurok, the California tribe among whom he most often worked. He replied that he "could not stand all of the tears."[25] Whatever the limitations to the anthropology of suffering, it's surely a good thing that we now feel some obligation to not ignore the travails of our fellow human beings (and I'm delighted myself to see so admirable a figure as Farmer become an undergraduate campus hero).

Still other ways of trying to make anthropology matter have developed. Consider the genre of what might be termed exposé ethnography. Here the anthropologist scrutinizes troubling American institutions—supermax prisons, car culture, big pharmaceutical companies, military bases.[26] In this instance of blurred boundaries, we edge onto journalism's turf and into a muckraking anthropology that would have America face some of its own by turns stupid, cruel, and self-destructive habits. Of late too we have seen growing interest in what Arturo Escobar terms the *pluriverse*, namely in alternative models of life and ontology to dominant Western models.[27] This scholarship is novel in its varied inspirations and expansive ambitions, a role for anthropology in making visible and even designing a whole new plan for an imperiled planet. At least in its strong interest in indigenous lifeways, the turn to the pluriverse also bears continuities with the older tradition of what Fischer and Marcus called "anthropology as cultural critique" and its strategy of using the example of an elsewhere to rethink our own society (the hoary classic being, of course, Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*, the best-selling anthropology book ever).[28] Thus, for example, Marisol de la Cadena introduces the concept of "indigenous cosmopolitics" to suggest how some native ways of thinking challenge or, at least, in Isabelle Stenger's terms, "slow down" the orthodox Western worldview that divides nature and culture, magic and science, religion and politics.[29] Here the anthropologist once more seeks to save us from ourselves by opening our eyes to other ways of seeing the world (and with the attendant perils of recycling shopworn essentialisms about native peoples as the guardians of all that was lost in the West's fall into modernity).[30]

Digitality obviously brings a whole new, unanticipated set of factors into the equation. In the *Writing Culture* era most anthropologists still prepared their manuscripts on that now obsolete inscription device, the typewriter. None of us had yet heard of email and the Internet, much less had any premonition about

how they would rule our lives. Jackson's essay explores how the digital "rewires anthropological possibility" for better and worse. Now when we teach, we use blogs and online course material platforms and sometimes offer whole classes through the Internet; we access articles and books at a click, as against those many trips into the library stacks in an earlier day; and even those of us who have worked in faraway places, Peru in my case, now find that the "field" no longer seems far away at all in the age of Skype, Facebook, and the instant message. As much a cultural as a technological revolution, the cyberization of anthropology has brought different habits, rhythms, and sensibilities, among them the prototypical time-space compression of postfordist times. Now, as we know too well, an undergraduate can instantly email his complaint about an exam grade's supposed unfairness instead of cooling his heels until office hours. Graduate students keep abreast of the latest publications and grants and the progress of their peers through the Internet's glutted communications networks. (One wonders what role the sense of always measuring and being measured, not to mention the perennially bad job market, plays in so much anxiety and depression in anthropology doctoral programs.) The foreshortening effect of digitality, the sharp-sighted Jackson suggests, also brings new monitoring and accountability. He wonders about members of the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem, the religious sect he has studied, watching and perhaps objecting to a talk he gave about them at Stanford University, now archived as a webcast. The Internet, Jackson concludes, "humbl[es] the ethnographer's aspirations for a kind of a one-sided voyeurism." No longer do anthropologists enjoy the undemocratic luxury of saying whatever they please about "their" people without having to worry about anyone talking back.

The great widening of anthropology's gaze introduces still other quandaries. So much has the field turned from its former fixation on the primitive that more anthropology dissertations appear every year about the United States than any other country. Much ethnography, in the older disciplinary tradition of documenting Otherness, remains focused on what Micaela di Leonardo calls "exotics at home"—the homeless, the imprisoned, the addicted, the migrant.[31] But that's by no means always true now with the anthropology of finance, biotechnology, advertising, law, and other research that puts the more privileged under anthropology's microscope. Funding for anthropology dissertation research stateside is still sometimes in scarce supply. (For example, the SSRC and Fulbright support only international projects.) It can also be hard for anthropologists of the United States to get hired, at least in an anthropology department (and this because most departments already

have faculty researching topics in this country thanks to that familiar blowback trajectory where middle-aged, tenured anthropologists, for family and other reasons, leave their original Third World research sites for new projects closer to home). Then again one wonders if we might (already?) have gone too far toward bringing anthropology back home. If the discipline is really to be the study of human life everywhere, it surely behooves us to stay spread out. We do not, after all, want to play along with the parochial narcissism of an America that would like to imagine itself the center of the cosmos. There's a place, I'd say a need, for a discipline that insists on a genuinely global perspective. The matter of coverage and focus looks different, of course, from the standpoint of other anthropology traditions—say, the French or growing Chinese, Indian, or Brazilian ones. What counts as the field, home, and away have their own distinctive history in these places, each with its own questions about just what ought to be the distribution of disciplinary attention.

It's hard to tell where anthropology may be heading next. The discipline sometimes feels like a wacky grab bag of diverging concerns and agendas in the first place. Our four subfields are outrageously different in their history, foci, and the skills they demand. If the arrangement were not our real-life Boasian inheritance, it would have taken some LSD-tripping university administrator to dream up housing in the same department the likes of biological anthropologists, real scientists with labs and microscopes, and we humanities-oriented culturals (whose natural sciences expertise, or mine at least, quite often does not go much beyond watching the occasional Discovery Channel special on the search for the Abominable Snowman).[32] Cultural anthropology alone remains a crazy quilt with its countless AAA subsections. We work in very different conditions, from community colleges to four-year liberal arts colleges and universities, public to private institutions, not to mention outside the academy. We bring our own particular, sometimes idiosyncratic tool kits of theory and method to every new research project. Those milling meetings crowds show no more sign than ever of rallying to the banner of any single topic, methodology, or grand unifying paradigm. (And, when held in more bewitching cities like New Orleans, the assembled anthropologists spend less time at the panels than in nightclubs and bars anyway.)

But neither does the field seem about to dissolve anytime soon. We anthropologists, or at least the culturals, do have some things more or less in common: a history, habits, and shared reference points. The venerable