

Lessons from New New Journalism

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Abstract: Writing is critical to two main anthropological goals: to communicate useful knowledge about humanity and society; and to stimulate interest, discussion, and action on issues that are of societal import. To achieve these goals anthropologists must write in accessible styles for diverse audiences. In this paper, we review the work of five popular nonfiction writers to determine the extent to which their approachable writing styles are compatible with anthropological rigor and nuance. While none of these authors meets all of our hopes for anthropological analysis, each does manage to blend some elements of scholarship with a readable style. We therefore highlight some of their stylistic approaches in the hope that these might help anthropologists engage more effectively in public debate.

Key words: non-fiction writing, New New Journalism, politics of representation, reflexivity

Anthropologists often reflect on the method, style, format, and impact of their writing. A surge of essays and books in the 1980s and early 1990s addressed the problems inherent in representation and urged anthropologists to experiment with the ethnographic form in the hopes of finding more dialectical, critical, reflexive, and/or non-colonial approaches (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988; Harrison 1991; Behar and Gordon 1995). *Anthropology News* recently published a series of short articles by participants in the School of American Research's "Writing Culture Planning Seminar" that emphasized, among other things, the need for anthropologists to engage a broader public (Anthropology News 2005). Similarly, in a 1992 AAA distinguished lecture, Roy Rappaport advised anthropologists to make our writing both intelligible and "audible" if we want to increase awareness, discussion, and action and help to "avoid, ameliorate, or correct [systemic] troubles rather than to exacerbate them" (Rappaport 1993: 301).

Writing is critical to two main anthropological goals: to communicate useful knowledge about humanity and society; and to

stimulate interest, discussion, and action on issues that are of societal import. To meet Rappaport's challenge and engage a broader public we will need to write according to the tastes, interests, and concerns of different audiences, but we will have to do this without abandoning the standards of our discipline. Anthropology is distinguished by a search for complexity through rigorous field work and analysis. We tend to distrust clean and easy descriptions and therefore devote much of our attention to alternative or contradictory explanations and the subtle nuances of the phenomena we study. Furthermore, as social scientists it is important that we describe our methodologies clearly and engage productively with existing social theory. Our challenge as public writers is to communicate plainly and honestly without sacrificing this anthropological rigor and subtlety.

In recent years, a number of literary nonfiction authors have investigated areas of current anthropological concern using and stimulated discussion across a wide spectrum of the public. In this article, we examine these writers' works to see what stylistic strategies we anthropologists might borrow from them to enhance our own writing.

"NEW NEW JOURNALISTS"

In July 2003, journalist Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven* touched off a minor media firestorm. Within weeks, Krakauer's book – an examination of two gruesome Utah murders in the context of Mormon fundamentalism and the broader history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints – had been publicly denounced by high-ranking Mormon officials, reviewed in local papers and prestigious weeklies ranging from the Salt Lake City Tribune to the New Yorker and USA Today, and feverishly debated in online forums around the world. Two years later, *Under the Banner of Heaven* continues to be widely invoked in discussions of fanaticism, violence, and religious faith.

Eric Schlosser, another popular investigative author, has written about contemporary and controversial issues in 31 articles and two books over a period of ten years. His first book, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (2001), was a bestseller, and his latest book, *Reefer Madness: Sex, Drugs, and Cheap Labor in the American Black Market* (2003), has posted impressive book sales and sparked wide-ranging debate in popular magazines and on the internet. Schlosser, who

was educated as a historian at both Princeton and Oxford, has written “muckraking” articles and books on big business in the food industry, agricultural labor, pornography, and the prison system.

According to NYU journalism professor Robert S. Boynton, writers like Krakauer and Schlosser represent an elite new breed of writer whose “literary journalism” is “securing a place at the very center of contemporary American literature” (Boynton 2005). In Boynton’s *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America’s Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft* (2005), thirteen nonfiction writers discuss the methods and journalistic philosophies that have led to works that are “rigorously reported, psychologically astute, sociologically sophisticated and politically aware.” As Boynton’s label suggests, New New Journalism’s (NNJ) roots extend to the creative literary nonfiction of Truman Capote, Joan Didion, Hunter S. Thompson, and the other writers collected and championed by Thomas Wolfe in *The New Journalism* (1973). But where Wolfe’s “New Journalism” emphasized creativity, idiosyncrasy, and a rejection of the formal and stylistic strictures of traditional journalism, Boynton suggests his New New Journalists represent a return to rigorous, detail-oriented reporting. While sharing an appetite for long form, literary writing – Capote’s “nonfiction novel” (Wolfe 1973: 41) – New New Journalism emphasizes “the events and characters of everyday life over turns of bravura in writing style.” (See New New Journalism website.)

New New Journalists use a long-term immersion strategy to understand prison systems, transnational immigration, poverty, race, the clash of faiths, big business—what Boynton declares to be “the issues that the world cares about”—and they bring the results to the pages of *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic Monthly* as well as best-selling books (Boynton 2005: xxix). While the New New Journalists do not self-identify as a coherent group, Boynton explains that they share:

a dedication to the craft of reporting, a conviction that by immersing themselves deeply into their subjects’ lives, often for prolonged periods of time, they can . . . bridge the gap between their subjective perspective and the reality they are observing, that they can render reality in a way that is both accurate and aesthetically pleasing. (Boynton 2005: xxvii)

Of course, New New Journalists aren’t the first to specialize in “[r]eporting on the minutiae of the ordinary – often over a period of years” (Boynton 2005: xv). These methods and goals have formed the

basis of anthropology since Malinowski helped to move its practitioners from armchairs into the field. In fact, Malinowski used quite similar language in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* when he emphasized the importance of understanding “the imponderabilia of actual life” through ethnographic observation and participation over long periods of living in the field (Malinowski 1922: 18). In addition to their methodological similarities, anthropologists and New New Journalists share a focus on social and cultural issues, a desire to bridge researcher subjectivity and observed reality, an innate skepticism, and a knack for picking apart the complex processes that lie beneath received norms.

The apparent affinities between ethnographic practice and New New Journalism – and the success of investigative nonfiction at eliciting vibrant, widespread public debate – demand that we look further into the similarities and differences between these enterprises and how they might enrich each other. Setting aside the question of whether New New Journalists do actually represent a new movement within journalism, we examine several of Boynton’s authors’ works to determine what they might contribute to anthropological studies, either methodologically or conceptually.

BLENDING SCHOLARSHIP WITH STYLE

Leon Dash writes that Basic Books editor Paul Golob “had a favorite expression when cutting entire sections of prose. ‘Too academic,’ he’d say” (Dash 1996: 279). Eliminating turgid prose may be an innocent stylistic modification, but some academic conventions are useful and should be preserved. Discussions of theory and method, for example, can shed light on the complexity of social phenomena and the reliability of the author’s perspective. The question that arises, then, is whether anthropologists must sacrifice rigor, nuance, and method to write well.

In this section, we review five works of “literary non-fiction” to answer this question and evaluate the prospect for a more lucid anthropological style. As you will see, the works reveal that it is possible to write with rigor and nuance while remaining intelligible to both academic and popular audiences. Few of these works meet the ideal of ethnographic perfection, but each incorporates some elements of anthropological work within an accessible writing style. Taken as a whole, these authors pursue multi-sited research that follows the movements of people and money, they pursue long-term in-depth research in a single location, they maintain enough flexibility in the field

to investigate new themes and follow new leads, and they combine field work with extensive reviews of secondary sources to test and contextualize their interpretations. These authors address theoretical debates (though often not explicitly) and several of them clearly present and defend their research methodologies.

Since these New New Journalists show that one can write for the general public and maintain elements of scholarly (anthropological) rigor and nuance, we also discuss the stylistic elements employed by each author. The New New Journalists' writing styles are effective strategies for popular communication that may be useful to anthropologists seeking to reach broader audiences and stimulate discussion, awareness, and action.

WILLIAM LANGEWIESCHE

William Langewiesche's essays in *Cutting for Sign* (1993) raise important anthropological questions about the US-Mexican border and demonstrate the author's awareness of the complexity of the region and the need to present multiple perspectives. The title suggests that Langewiesche is applying the Tohono O'odham art of tracking to the entire border, "reading the marks that human beings have made on this contested land and decoding the meaning they hold for the rest of us" (back cover). Langewiesche's tracking adventures provide a good parallel to the multi-sited methodologies that anthropologists have used to construct ethnographies of global flows and transnational spaces. He investigates characters (border agents, immigrants, and activists), commodity flows (drugs), and territorial and trans-border institutions (maquilas and government agencies) to highlight the ways in which they are connected to lives on both sides of the fence. This diversity of sources and subjects gives Langewiesche's account a breadth of perspectives that should be instructive for anthropologists.

Unfortunately, Langewiesche leaves us guessing about both his tracking methods and the decoded meanings he may have found and, therefore, fails to meet some very basic standards for sound social science. Most importantly, he gives the reader little basis for evaluating his claims and interpretations. *Cutting for Sign* is full of interesting entrances and exits, and Langewiesche weaves observations and interview fragments into each chapter, but he never discusses his methods and the amount of time that he spent in each place. In addition,

even while presenting a multi-vocal account of the border, Langewiesche rarely mentions the voices that are excluded from his own writing. Finally, Langewiesche does not reference the many other border research projects that could extend the depth and breadth of his own account. The result is a book that gives a sense of the border's complexity but tends toward overly simplified analyses. In this sense, his work reveals an important dilemma for anthropologists and journalists studying spaces and peoples heavily affected by globalization: that it is all too easy to sacrifice depth to cover the breadth of relevant global processes.

These shortcomings may seem unpalatable to savvy anthropologists, but they may also be a part of Langewiesche's appeal to readers. The power of *Cutting for Sign* is not analytical; it is descriptive. Langewiesche is a gifted storyteller who leaves the reader to make sense of it all, to find what lies beneath the surface. As he puts it, "I am my readers' eyes and ears. If I have one job, it's to tell my cherished readers to look beyond the façade, to have the courage to embrace the ugly and the real, and to avoid romanticizing the world. I am their agent on the ground" (Boynton 2005: 213). Anthropologists seeking to share lessons from their travels might take a similar approach. Well-crafted stories of unknown worlds are compelling and, as any student of myth or folklore can confirm, a good story can convey the complexities and dilemmas we uncover in the field.

Anthropologists can also learn from the way that Langewiesche selects the driving narrative of his stories. In an interview with Boynton, Langewiesche explained that he looks "for the most specific, concrete story" that he can find to explore the issue he is addressing, and the more intelligible that story will be to the "typical" U.S. readers the better (Boynton 2005: 212). Context is then woven into each tangible, concrete story through observations, dialogue, history, and policy discussions, rather than being presented in separate sections. This makes Langewiesche's account coherent and provides an organic and intelligible context for the multiple narratives and complex politics of the border region.

JOHN KRAKAUER

In *Under the Banner of Heaven*, John Krakauer examines the gory 1984 double murder of a woman and her infant daughter by a pair of Mormon fundamentalists, by placing it in historic and social context. His

efforts to make sense of the killings leads him to a broader investigation of Mormon fundamentalism and, ultimately, to an exploration of the history of the Mormon Church in general. This analysis, in turn, leads him to broader musings about the nature of religious faith, extremism, and violence.

In many respects, Krakauer's narrative is derived from explicit, clearly stated sources. An afterword identifies his main documentary sources and describes the particulars of his interviews, and extensive endnotes for each chapter indicate the chief interviews or documents used, the duration of "fieldwork" in each of Krakauer's interview and research locations, and other details. On the other hand, Krakauer frequently plays fast and loose with these sources, often using them as little more than window dressing. He exhibits a weakness for essentializing language and broad generalizations that are often only loosely linked to the "evidence" presented. Krakauer also tends to uncritically accept secondary accounts that support his own conclusions, particularly if the events in question are flashy or provocative, while sources that contradict his positions are largely absent from his account.

Despite an occasional tendency to overstate his case, Krakauer employs many narrative devices of potential utility to ethnographers. These include the use of vignettes and storytelling, often from the perspective of his interview subjects, as a means to focus attention on an interview and capture the essence of an argument or situation. Krakauer's narrative is heavily focused on these interviews, and extensive quoting of his interviewees throughout the book enhances the reader's personal sense of these subjects and provides concrete points of departure for further discussion and analysis. Krakauer also devotes a great deal of attention to detailed descriptions of both people and places, setting scenes and painting mental pictures of both locations and informants. His introduction of prominent informant DeLoy Bateman, for instance, occupies several pages and duly presents the essential facts of Bateman's personal history and social situation (Krakauer 2003: 11-15). The quotes and descriptive passages interwoven with these details, however, succinctly summarize Bateman's fundamentalist Mormon upbringing and his disagreements with the current fundamentalist leadership without unnecessary exposition, tying Bateman's perspectives and ideas to the book's broader argument while providing readers with a set of images and impressions of Bateman and his surroundings.

In general, Krakauer's language is straightforward and engaging, and he writes with a populist, broadly focused voice that explicitly aims at a wide, diverse audience. Above all, Krakauer frames *Under the Banner of Heaven* as a personal investigation, offering the reader a sense of his own evolving thought processes as the story unfolds and emphasizing. The result is a narrative perspective that positions the reader as a fellow traveler in a shared intellectual journey, rather than a passive audience for Krakauer's findings.

ERIC SCHLOSSER

Eric Schlosser has developed a reputation for being a "muckraker" who makes the facts and perspectives of his subjects comprehensible to the lay reader. He looks at how people are affected by the links between globalization, big business practices, and government actions. In *Reefer Madness*, Schlosser combines three long investigative pieces on the American underground industries of marijuana, pornography, and illegal immigrant labor in the agricultural sector. Analytically, Schlosser uses these three cases to examine the underlying causes, individual stories, and implications of underground economies in general. He consistently "follows the money" to get a clearer picture of the motivations of the parties involved. According to him, the growth and pervasiveness of these industries are shaped by intense, "moralistic" policies of criminalization and regulation by government while protecting or promoting other favored business sectors.

Though this book is not academic in the strict sense, Schlosser uses extensive secondary material, key informant interviews, and site visits for scoping or confirmatory activities. He includes bibliographic references and extensive footnotes to elaborate on central points. And, though he does not dwell on his methodology, the reader gleans it from his research stories, the people he interviews, the life stories of his key informants, and his portrayal of key events.

Schlosser is an elegant writer, and *Reefer Madness* is a clear, concise snapshot of underground businesses. Anthropologists can particularly learn from the way that he shows, rather than tells, readers about complex events. For example, Schlosser provides a detailed description of drug law that is made interesting by the ways that he embeds it within compelling stories. By constantly relating legal details to their tangible

effects on individuals, families, communities, and the nation, he is able to bring the law to life.

For example, he notes that a legal clause enables government agencies to expropriate immediately the property of suspected marijuana growers, distributors, and users. This has motivated drug enforcement officials to zealously enforce marijuana laws. In the case of pornography, he notes how the industry became mainstream by linking to conventional economic resources such as cable TV, the worldwide web, and mail-order and online shopping.

Schlosser unearths the facts to make social and political issues evident, but he does not hide his own perspective. Readers might appreciate his forthrightness and the way that he builds from the facts and his perspective into more abstract questions for them to ponder, as evident in his conclusion:

Black markets will always be with us. But they will recede in importance when our public morality is consistent with our private one. The underground is a good measure of the progress and the health of nations. When much is wrong, much needs to be hidden. (Schlosser 2003: 219)

LEON DASH

Leon Dash's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Rosa Lee* (1996) is the complex portrayal of a black woman and her grown children caught up in virtually all the trappings of urban poverty: drugs, crime, HIV, welfare, prostitution. Motivated by his desire to get beyond stereotypical blame-the-victim explanations of poverty, Dash spends four years deeply immersed in the lives of Rosa Lee and six of her eight grown children. The result is a narrative that, as the author says, can "confirm any political viewpoint – liberal, moderate, or conservative" (Dash 1996: 251). While never using terms like participant observation or oral history, Dash is quite explicit about his methodology. He tells the reader that he spent four years with Rosa Lee and her family during the course of writing the book, hanging out in her apartment, giving her rides to various appointments, and helping her decipher overdue bills because she cannot read. He is always clear about when he is interviewing Rosa Lee in a more formal sense and when he is simply observing her and others interact, employing many direct quotes of their conversations.

The only critique we can level at Dash's narrative is similar to the criticisms received by Philippe Bourgois' *In Search of Respect* (1995) involving the politics of representation. Dash provides a very intimate account of a variety of illicit (and some would say, immoral) activities engaged in by Rosa Lee and her children, which could easily be construed, despite the opposite intent of the author, as yet another example of pathologizing the poor. Furthermore, by choosing to enter debates about structural violence, personal responsibility and cultures of poverty through the experiences of an urban, black, single mother, Dash runs the risk of reinforcing mid-1990s images of black women as irresponsible and predatory "welfare queens."

Dash, of course, is trying to challenge and complicate this essentialized representation of urban poverty, but one wonders to what extent his account is acceptable precisely because it builds upon a conventional cast of characters, one that does not confront the reader's preconceptions. Would the same quality of writing featuring a law-abiding, non-drug-abusing, poor black (or white?) welfare recipient be as compelling a read, or is it the voyeuristic glimpse into this Other world that is required to sell books? Anthropologists attempting to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and alter the terrain of popular debate – whether on poverty or other issues – must also consider how to balance intelligibility with confrontation and complication.

Dash clearly considered the ethics of representation, and *Rosa Lee* is as robust in its treatment of ethical issues as it is with methodology. He is careful to avoid explicit generalizations from Rosa Lee's story to urban blacks in general. Dash also draws boundaries during his research period such as not lending anyone in the family money or giving them his home phone number, which he only relaxes when he and Rosa Lee's relationship transitions into one of friendship upon completion of the book.

The main differences between this narrative and the standard ethnography are stylistic. Dash allows the story of Rosa Lee to stand on its own through most of the book. He sprinkles the narrative with methodological and ethical concerns, but reserves theoretical arguments for the Epilogue, in which he draws on the work of several scholars to argue against the view that Rosa Lee is totally to blame for her circumstances. "It is obvious to me," he writes, "that what happened to Rosa Lee, and continues with three generations of her direct

descendants, is tied much more strongly to the low class and caste level to which her family was relegated before she was born than to her many admittedly bad choices" (Dash 1996: 274). This stylistic move helps make *Rosa Lee* an engaging and compelling read and could benefit anthropological writing as well. Telling the story first and then delving into theoretical issues allows the reader to enter an unfamiliar world and provides something tangible to ground theoretical discussions, which by their very nature tend to be abstract.

ALEX KOTLOWITZ

The Other Side of the River by Alex Kotlowitz (1999) also addresses issues of race and poverty in America. Kotlowitz's book tells the story of the mysterious death of a black teenager, Eric McGinnis, in southwest Michigan. When McGinnis' body surfaces in the St. Joseph River, the evidence points to foul play. The two towns along the river, Benton Harbor and St. Joseph, are divided physically by the river, and socially by race and class. Eric McGinnis' murder, occurring in the early 1990s around the time of the Rodney King trial and Los Angeles riots, forced the towns to grapple with the possibility of a highly racially charged trial.

Kotlowitz, unlike most journalists, includes an appendix about the methodology he used during the five years he spent writing this book. He reveals that he collected over 200 interviews, read numerous documents such as police reports and newspaper articles, and visited many of the places that Eric McGinnis frequented for over five years before his murder. The book very narrowly focused on McGinnis's murder, which Kotlowitz places in the context of racial and class issues in America.

Like many reflexive and postmodern anthropologists, Kotlowitz tells his tale from the first person perspective and at times focuses more on his personal journey and the struggles he faced while investigating this case than on the data he collected. The style and tone of Kotlowitz's writing is very easy to read and makes it accessible for a broad audience regardless of their knowledge of race relations. The ease of his writing style can captivate a reader and make the reader feel as though he or she is following in Kotlowitz's footsteps in investigating the case.

The easy reading style of this book, however, is a bit of a disappointment. A reader picks up the book expecting to read strong

and moving social commentary, but this analysis tends to be buried by the mystery novel that emerges. While the other works reviewed suggest the value of infusing anthropology with more literary styles, *The Other Side of the River* reveals the importance of maintaining strong scholarship and relevant commentary within the more literary form.

WRITING FOR ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND OUR PUBLICS

In a recent article, anthropologist Darby Stapp (2005) concludes that non-anthropological readers are not as interested in our “specific research results” as they are in the “knowledge gained from research” and how it affects their own lives. Our discussion suggests that New New Journalists and other literary nonfiction writers may reach a broader public by writing in a style that encourages readers to extend the events and lessons of the text into their own lives. These authors engage their audience in a shared exploration of their findings and connect individual stories to broader social issues and their potential impact on readers. Stylistically, some of the most important lessons that we can learn from the New New Journalists are: (1) to select characters and stories carefully so that they are tangible to our readers while also challenging conventional assumptions and representations, (2) to weave historical and political context into these stories gradually, rather than presenting it at once in an introduction, (3) to provide analytical and theoretical analysis, but to foreground narratives so that readers can first enter the case before engaging with analysis, and (4) to include our own stories, opinions, and interpretations while also promoting readers’ authority to establish their own analyses and interpretations.

Similar strategies were once a common feature of anthropological writing and remain so for a number of authors, like the popular archaeologist David Hurst Thomas or medical anthropologist and activist Paul Farmer. These “experimental” writing techniques were also promoted by Clifford, Marcus, and Fischer in the mid-1980s and pursued by a wide range of notable anthropologists. Our hope is that stylistic experimentation will move beyond introspection and critique of academic discourse and anthropological authority—though these are important—to promote critical commentary on and popular discussion of pressing social issues.

Our investigation of New New Journalism suggests that accessible styles remain within the reach of contemporary anthropologists, and that

we can make anthropology intelligible and audible to diverse audiences without sacrificing the rigor and nuance that makes the anthropological perspective so important. Learning to connect our field experiences to the lives of our readers may actually enhance the quality of our analyses by forcing us to consider connections, similarities, and differences that we might otherwise overlook.

Transforming our research data into useful and audible writing that promotes critical awareness and reflection is an important task of anthropology and a valuable form of anthropological engagement. As Darby Stapp writes, "The market is vast for anthropological knowledge and wisdom, but anthropologists are not feeding that market" (2005: 7). The New New Journalists surveyed here have successfully employed anthropological methods and discussed anthropological issues in a publicly accessible way. We hope that anthropologists will increasingly blend journalistic stylistic techniques with our own intellectual and theoretical traditions to further enrich our writings and public discourse.

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