

Book Review: Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing edited by Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean

In *Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing*, editors Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean offer a collection that seeks to open up the possibilities for ethnographic research by approaching writing as a 'material adventure'. As the volume grapples with longstanding questions regarding the ethical challenges of capturing one's subjects in language, Fawzia Haeri Mazanderani nonetheless finds this a moving reminder of the power of words to enable entry into alternative ways of seeing, and potentially being, in the world.

***Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing*. Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean (eds). Duke University Press. 2017.**

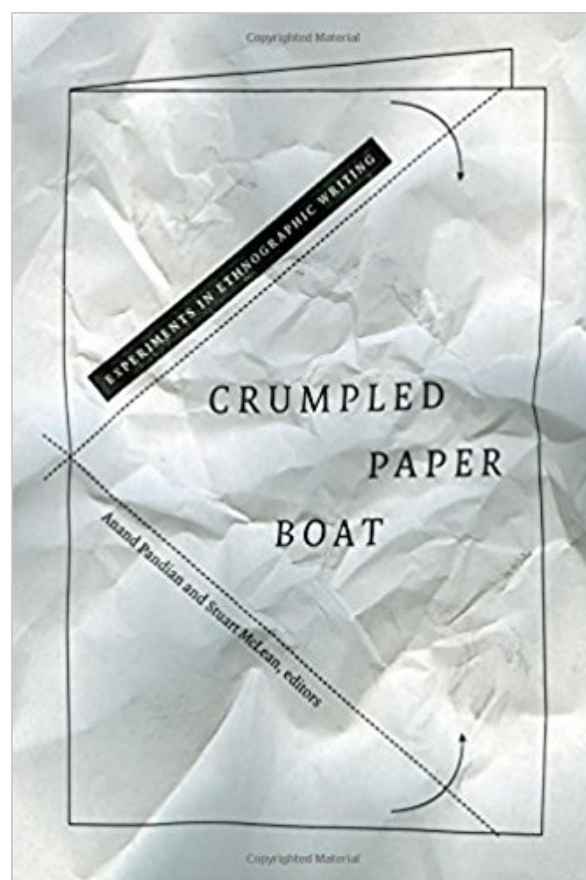
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Writer James Agee, when commissioned to bring back an enticing story for *Fortune* magazine about impoverished farmers in the US South during the Great Depression, expressed a desire to 'tear up a clump of earth with a hoe, put that on a page and publish it' (*The Vulnerable Observer*, 5). This sentiment reflects the struggles of ethnographers, who, when faced with the limitations of language in conveying the texture of their field sites, may resort to words that neither relate the richness of their experiences nor do justice to the realities they seek to represent.

30 years ago, a group of scholars came together to discuss the complexities of crafting ethnography, compiling the volume *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, which remains one of the most significant anthropological works to date. By illuminating the predicament of ethnography as being caught up in the invention and not the representation of cultures, this iconic text continues to reflect the impossibility of capturing and conveying the full 'truth' of the object under the ethnographic gaze.

30 years later, a group of anthropologists that has shared a commitment to the practice of writing and a frustration with the limits of conventional scholarly prose convened for a seminar on 'Literary Anthropology'. The gathering led to the publication of this new book, *Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing*, edited by Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean. The book's title, which evokes images of a fragile vessel, the body upon which words may or may not have materialised, represents the uncertainties that can lead writers to disregard their ideas. It also conjures 'the sense of writing as a material adventure' (2), with words that travel to unforeseen destinations, encountering both risk and potentialities.

True to its title, *Crumpled Paper Boat* consists of different experiments in writing, encompassing reflexive commentaries on ethnographers' writing practices and various poetic and prose-like reflections, which, while born from ethnographic observations, defy narrative conventions. In a spirit of collaboration, the book also provides spaces for contributors to comment on each other's approaches, with one chapter composed by ten scholars and made up of fragmentary thoughts, moulded together so that none of its ideas has been assigned to a single author.



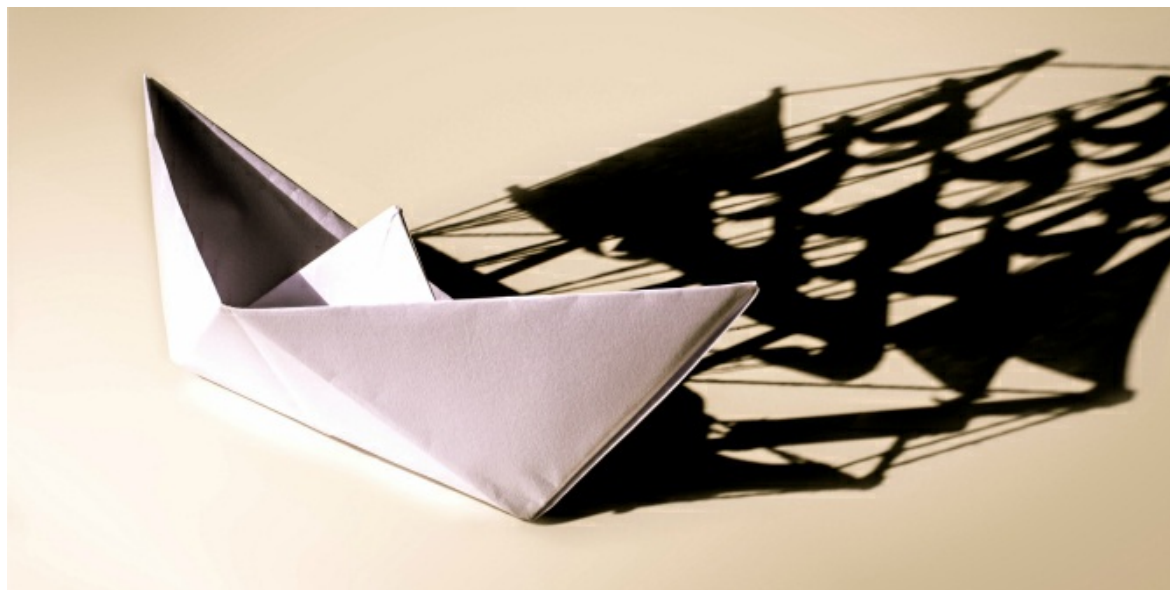


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While each contribution spans different international contexts and themes, every chapter shares the quality of being immersive and often haunting in nature, weighing on the reader in such a way that invites pause. This is not a quality to be taken lightly, given the propensity for social scientific studies to render accounts of human life in such a dry manner that readers have to remind themselves it is other people being discussed. The engaging nature of these 'ethnographic experiments' is not, however, surprising, given ethnography's reputation for borrowing from figurative language, fiction narratives, poetry and cinema in order to 'give life to a text' and 'counter the deadening effects of academic jargon and abstraction' (48).

At the same time, anthropology has been critiqued for blurring documentary and fictional modes, and debates continue regarding the extent to which ethnography should intersect with writing of a more literary persuasion. This relates to what I shall refer to as 'The Predicament of the P's': namely, what space there is for Poetic renderings to be Political or for Political concerns to contain Poetic elements. For while works of literature have supposedly free reign to invent the lives of others, ethnography, grounded as it is in experience, still embodies the hope of 'doing justice to real people in real lifeworlds' (48).

But can any ethnographer achieve such 'justice'? When not researching one's 'home', can anthropologists resolve the contradiction between the values of the world to which they are coming from and the environments from which they draw their raw material? Does the casting of a literary net over anthropological findings overcome this contradiction or exacerbate it? As for ethnographers whose origins are 'working class' or 'third world', the population groups which remain (problematically) the focus of most anthropological texts, would a more literary rendering of experiences be a greater or lesser betrayal of people's lives than a more formal academic discussion? (62)

These are some of the provocations raised within *Crumpled Paper Boat*, which acknowledges that the question of whether we can do justice to those we write about can never be answered directly. Yet, by presenting some of the ways in which ethnographers are writing against the grain, editors Pandian and McLean re-imagine what an ethnographic sensibility can look like. One example of this is 'Anthropoetry', which, in conveying ethnographic observations through poetic verses, allows insights to emerge from specifics rather than generalisations. Far from providing any systematic documentation of the lives of others, these poems' unconventional line lengths, shifting rhythms and vivacious metaphors convey something of the immediacy of witnessing passing moments (74). For example, in the poem 'Sea', McLean emphasises absences and the empty spaces within knowing, a perspective that contrasts with traditional ethnographic accounts that attempt to provide a more cohesive or 'full' rendering of a scene. Instead, McLean pursues 'resonances rather than trajectories, fleeting possibilities rather than glorious predictions and summations' (170).

By providing 'experiments in textual montage' and 'speculative anthropology,' Pandian and McLean embrace writing which deviates from the expositions of subjects that are typically associated with social science. By 'suggesting meaning, rather than spelling it out' (59), the contributions to this volume refuse the notion of 'mastering context' and, with it, the anthropologist's performance of such mastery. The anthropological 'stories' it presents, many of which have been formed in the face of struggles, provide different windows into the world, which, to paraphrase Friedrich Nietzsche, 'possess art, lest we perish of the truth' (147).

Yet the act of making 'art' out of another's 'truth' raises ethical conundrums. While *Crumpled Paper Boat* acknowledges the danger of voyeurism in ethnographic work, it deems the risk of betraying the subjects of one's study to be as endemic to the practice of writing as to the project of anthropology (117). This raises the question of what it is to write 'with care', an act which implies more than simply taking precautions regarding anonymising research participant's identities or betraying their confidences. Instead, it is a concern to 'capture the humanity, vulnerability and hopefulness' of lives that are so readily written off in the discourse of the state and public media (46). While there is no yellow brick road that ethnographers can follow to achieve this, Pandian and McLean show how there can be many paths, with various approaches, from where the ethnographer can draw inspiration.

In a 'post-truth' world, where facts have become less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief, this publication is of timely importance. By presenting an array of literary experiments, it is a book that demonstrates how unconventional ethnographic reflections can provide meaningful insights into something of the world, with no less of a claim on 'truth' than more well-trodden approaches (13). Yet, while embracing fragmentation and the inevitable impartiality of any account, I was disappointed with how seldom the contributions made reference to theoretical developments that have occurred within the social sciences more broadly, with post-structural, postcolonial and feminist theories coming particularly to mind.

That said, given that the book's emphasis on ethnographic experimentation rather than epistemology, I sincerely recommend it to any budding ethnographers who wish to explore their writing devices. It is a text that encourages the reader to embrace writing as a practice immanent to the world, rather than a detached reflection upon society and our place within it (3). More than that, I found it to be a deeply moving reminder of what had drawn me, and no doubt others, to ethnography in the first place: the power of words to enable entry into alternative ways of seeing, and potentially being, in the world.

Fawzia Haeri Mazanderani is in the third year of her PhD in Education at the University of Sussex. Her dissertation focuses on the development of aspirations of young people living in post-apartheid South Africa. She has a background in Social Anthropology from UCT (South Africa) and SOAS (London). [Read more by Fawzia Haeri Mazanderani.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.