Anthropology OFF THE SHELF
Anthropologists on Writing

Edited by Alisse Waterston and Maria D. Vesperi
The war orphans have gotten me through academia.

Every time I sit down to write, I knock a host of academic critics off my shoulder who tell me I can’t, shouldn’t, wouldn’t write what I believe in; that I must follow their guidelines for “truth,” academic style, and that (by the way) I’m not good enough, never will be. The delegation contains everyone from my former graduate school advisors to the anonymous reviewer who said I might as well quit anthropology altogether and chuck my writing (and why not myself, by the way) off the Golden Gate Bridge as my work was hopelessly terrible. Even kindly friends and unctuous journal editors trying to help me by explaining “how it is done” and why my style “just won’t work” join the others on my shoulder. Some are particularly hard to knock off: one of the worst whispers, “You think you can put that out there . . . they’ll think you’re stupid.”

And then I remember why I’m writing.

I remember sitting on dusty broken street curbs amid the cacophonous swirl of life and war with kids who gently and patiently explain what it means to be human, to have dignity, to survive on a very unequal playing field. Kids whose theories of life are as vibrant as any scholar’s I’ve met. Children who have been exposed to the worst violence humans have invented and yet continue to care.

They help push the academic judges and juries off me: “We’re the story. We are why you travel, why you write.”

And they bring in their own reinforcements, sitting not on my shoulder, as the judges do, but alongside me – sprawled ephemerally in my mind’s eye in the tropical sun, twirling bits of grass in their fingers, clapping one another on the back in affectionate camaraderie, offering a cool drink when things get hot. Reinforcements like the starving Mozambican village woman who punched out a murderous soldier humiliating her with such force that the troops left, fearing she was sparking a revolt. Like the Sri Lankan
They, too, struggle with the demons of academia, searching for innovative solutions to our discipline. Their words have freed my writing. There are too many to cite by name, thank goodness. But examples come easily. I remember panicking while writing one of my first articles after defending my dissertation, and calling JoAnn Martin. As I poured out my anguish at my terror of writing trash, I heard her start to laugh. “OK, Carolyn, I’m looking at my watch. You can whine away for 15 more seconds, and then I want you to sit down and get that fodder done.” I recall Bruce Kapferer saying to me a few years back, “Good God, woman, let loose; shake up the Academy, write something New.” I feel warmed by the gentle kindness of colleagues such as Victoria Sanford who know the value of support and the words “I love our work.” I hold them dear when fellow anthropologists, ostensibly peaceful, attack with verbal savagery. On days when the war orphans need some assistance, I am inspired by Paul Farmer’s honesty and heart: “It’s ok for scholarship, for anthropology, for us, for me, to care.” These are good antidotes to those late-night existential quandaries—the ones I describe as sitting on the dusty crumbling curb of our fieldsite at three in the morning ripping out our guts and inspecting them with a cheap plastic flashlight we bought in the street market for a buck: “What am I offering to life?” And the invitations that make it possible to go on: dinner with Tony Robbins’ family, Burma with Monique Skidmore, sitting in the middle of the parking lot at midnight at the American Anthropological Association meetings with Rob Borofsky, all of them saying, “Hey, we can do it.”

Do I see myself as some voice, some savior of the war-afflicted? Of the violated and the orphaned? No. This strikes me as offensive. It certainly strikes the war-afflicted as offensive. I have learned a more palatable view from the in-field philosophers: we all, as humans, have a responsibility to creatively offer something to the world. Not more than one person can. Just our bit.

Creativity is not an individual act. In my opinion, it takes meaning only when it adds to the sum of our humanity. The traders offering their last bit of food to those being bombed on the front are forging a better world in the midst of violence, and one that is easily as important (perhaps more) as the one academicians create with their publications and policies. The peasant who lives Foucault in resistance to abusive violence may well be more innovative than a scholar critiquing his work for a grade or a promotion.

What’s my bit? I tell my students to research and write about what sets their hearts aflame; what they care about enough to jump out of bed after a few hours’ sleep to study; what their intellects truly love because it takes
them to worlds deeper and more meaningful than they thought possible. Not about any notion of should.

These passions are a curious and intangible blend of history, creativity, imagination, guts, self-identity, and serendipity. In my case: I inadvertently witnessed a massacre of peaceful political demonstrators when I was an undergraduate. As a graduate student, I got caught in an eruption of severe political violence. In my small and sleepy Midwest hometown, one of my best childhood friends was beaten to death with a brick. I found out another of my closest childhood friends was gang-raped during the time I was researching rape camps overseas. The stories continue, but somewhere along here I realized a simple fact: war doesn’t make sense. Violating those who can’t protect themselves and fight back is unconscionable. There is no glory in bodies exploding into bits. Too many of my friends have died unnecessarily. This is what gets me up on cold rainy days to follow a story. When the judges sitting on my shoulder are particularly brutal (“You’ll be flipping hamburgers at McDonald’s for a living if you try to publish this crap”), I dedicate my writing to those I have known who have died. Or those battling on the frontlines for survival who have entrusted me to tell their stories. They are particularly adept at challenging the hegemony and onerous rules of academic gatekeepers.

i’d like

to write

like

this...

sometimes.

and once in a while burst into laughter at the joy of it all

or scream with pain

howling like a wounded animal

at the night

sky

the wild heartbeat of words across the page

cressing theory like

a

sizzling lover

but...

i don’t

well, at least not in

public.

you should

see

my field notebooks.

i show them to my students who are having existential crises

and every time

they

just

sit

there

and hold them

and then

smile.

‘i can do this’

they say,

and they mean

not

just

anthropology

but life.

I tried publishing an article in an anthropology journal recently, an article that broke the rules of convention. Nothing as raw as what is written above. A tamer but equally earnest version. “Sorry,” they wrote back. “Not sufficiently ethnographic: put in more data. Quote Bourdieu and explore Agamben. Make your argument more clearly.” I wrote back to thank them for their reviews; and noted that Bourdieu and Agamben wouldn’t be able to publish in this journal given their writing styles.

When I write at my university, the walls fade away into open savannah, and the sounds of students in the hallways give way to the raucous murmurings of open markets and backyard gatherings. My colleagues know this, and make cheerful noise when they come in my door to alert me to the fact that I’m in the USA, in my office, in a day filled with appointments cut into 15-minute slots. They are used to the fact that if they approach silently, I look at them blankly for a moment, wondering what they are
doing in Africa, or Sri Lanka; and worse, what I am doing in an office. Going to the place I am writing about in my head is an old trick of mine. It’s a feeling akin to allowing yourself to be in a movie you are watching. I can feel the sun on my face, the intangible ripples of war’s violence shaping the day, the emotions of the people I’m talking to. And that’s what I write.

But for me, it’s far better to actually write on the road. I’m most comfortable juggling my laptop on a rickety table in the field, the sounds of life swirling about me. Death is a lot closer in the field, but somehow that makes my writing more honest. The looks in the eyes of the people I’m talking to, writing about, remind me not to sanitize death, write out the pain, abstract the raw in bloodless theory.

There, on the frontlines of life, I can see what theory is meant to be – and here I speak of theory in the most encompassing sense: of the epistemologies that define our intellectual efforts in this era... meta-thought both intended and unwitting; the “definitives” of the Academy, capital A, poetry and power entwined. And simultaneously, in the field I see what the people I speak with intend it to be:

Ontology infused with searing insightful thought.
Epistemology that howls after a military attack. While deconstructing it.

People in the midst of living and dying understand this kind of theory. They encourage it. Many from the frontlines of wars I have met across Africa and Asia have said to me that western religious iconography is full of blood (pointing out Jesus on the cross), and its academic work bloodless. To them, this is about as useful as a body without blood: it is missing its lifeforce.

It is fascinating to me that when I take the jargon out of academic theory and explain it to people who may never have seen the inside of a classroom, they can engage with me on a level as deep as any of my university colleagues. I’ve discussed Foucault’s ideas about power with farmers in Sri Lanka (“Foucault basically has it right, but needs to factor in humans’ ability to react to power on at least five simultaneous planes: a non-thoughtful submission to oppressive power, the thoughtful spark of creative resistance to this, the tools of history, the potential of the [creative] unknown, and the grounding of individual as social will”). African peasant women have patiently explained to me that western epistemologies of knowledge lack an understanding of the fact that perception is never a mere linear process; that even asking the question of whether sense, perception or raw knowing precedes knowledge misses the point (“Knowledge can be embedded in raw perception, knowing is sense, and in battles the survivors have learned perception-is-action-is-knowing-is-perception”).

They couldn’t care less about the academic judges sitting on my shoulder telling me how I must engage with the idea of power and perception if I am to be published. For them, the war orphans are better critics.

If we can manage to keep them alive.

It isn’t enough to say I write for the war orphans. That keeps my sanity. But it doesn’t explain why I write. Why I go to warzones and get malaria and shot at and truly educated.

There are several reasons. One of them is not that I get an adrenaline rush by violence, or that I’m addicted to the heightened senses – living a life more intense than life – that come in the midst of war. People in warzones never ask that question of me. Hearing talk about the adrenaline rush of violence reminds me that we have a lot yet to learn about war. About human dignity. About research and the nature of being human. No one asks people if they study tuberculosis because of the neurochemical high they get, or assumes people investigate financial derivatives or the Japanese sense of self-identity for the rush.

Nor do I research violence because I decided to. It decided me. I was a student studying medical anthropology when I got caught in the epicenter of the 1983 rioting in Sri Lanka in which thousands of people were killed and one-sixth of the country’s infrastructure destroyed in seven days. I gave up what I was working on in order to study violence. I had seen something I couldn’t explain; and every explanation in print that I saw was inadequate. It feels physical, that Why? Why do some people hack vital life forces up into dead bits? Why do others risk their lives protecting someone they don’t know? Why can I so seldom find answers in print that match the reality of violence lived? Why care?

As I get older, and traveling in warzones and along extra-legal global pathways gets harder on my bones, I wonder why I still do it. The academy gracefully pardons its veterans (the tenured) from ongoing bouts of grueling fieldwork; it embraces equally those who go to the frontlines and those who go to soft beaches for fieldwork. And I have come to accept that there is something deeper that drives people to do what they do. Something that is perhaps the intellectual equivalent of the sex drive: a curiosity that drives the evolution of thought-lived. The kind of knowledge that makes us possible.
I remember reading about the man who illuminated turbulence theory. I can’t remember his actual job, but in my memory, he is something like a postal clerk. Certainly not a well-paid scientist in a laboratory. There was no career-related obligation for him to care. Nor am I sure he actually had the brown La-Z-Boy recliner chair that I picture. But he did come home from work each day and pull his home-made turbulence machine out from behind his living-room chair and throw himself into discovering the force explaining not only a foundation of water’s movement, but chaos theory. Why, I always wonder, would a man come home from work, tired and hungry, and instead of going for a beer with his mates, try to discover a fundamental force of our universe? Why do any of us leave the comforts of home to place ourselves on the brink of chaos? Whatever force it is – turbulence or otherwise – it feels tangible, and rather inescapable. As if along with eye color and kidney function, each of us is born with some burning question. The sum total equals humanity.

In addition to this, in warzones I discovered how big life really is. As an acquaintance once summed up: “It’s not that we go to warzones for the rush; it’s that we find out there is so much life.”

On the frontlines, every single person matters.

The good and the bad are conjoined in the dance of life and death, and neither is edited out, either in the daily telling or in the bard’s accounting.

In academia, we have “marginal topics” – the ones that usually aren’t in plenary sessions at the annual meetings; the ones that if you focus on, you have to look hard for a job, and worry more than usual about tenure. The ones that start to define your identity rather than your research site. When I came up for tenure, I had publications on just about every aspect of warzone ethnography conceivable. I learned my work on the economics of war was “masculine,” and therefore fundamentally weighty. So too with politics – but that was a bit more dodgy: whose politics? Publications on frontline actors – from soldiers through civilians to rogues – were seen as “gutsy,” and therefore respected. The quotes, however, from these actors were “art”; cool, but a bit insubstantial. And this bred over to define not merely my anthropology, but me. My work on children and war concretized this view, but lent it heart. Amid all this I had half a dozen articles on rape. Those, I was told, my committee took out of the packets that were being sent to my tenure reviewers. The committee felt they were acting in the best of faith: worried that the guardians of anthropology, the powers-that-be – those unnamed good people across the breadth of our universities – would be prejudiced against me if they associated me with work on rape.

And so in the annals of economics there are few articles on the economics of rape; and those on the politics of rape are far more often found in gender studies than in government science. Job openings follow along these same lines. Promotion is segregated.

Many tell me I am not alone when I escape to the field to find reality. To breathe in the vitality of life-lived. To feel free to cry at the stories we hear, and dance the joys of theory that begins to pulse with blood.

To revel in the fact that everyone matters.

Everything we cover in our research – from lies to love, from professors to war orphans – is part of a vast interrelated story of the human condition. To take out the economics, the children, the rapes, the evening meals, the nightmares spreading across the countryside, the creative solutions that walk hand in hand with the terrors, the politics, the smiles... renders it all false. It bleeds out the color and paints humanity in black and white. It hurts.

As I write this, I realize that in going to our disciplines’ inter/national meetings for more than two decades, I have heard not scores, but hundreds of heart-rending presentations on topics from HIV/AIDS to torture, from poverty to child abuse. Twice, I recall having heard people become emotional or cry while giving these papers.

Coming back from the field to our “day jobs” – to the academy – is often like going into another kind of warzone. This is a nearly universal feeling in my experience. Virtually everyone I know has some kind of existential crisis. I call it the “cereal aisle meltdown.” For me, it happens on the first trip to the western supermarket. I am stopped cold in front of the cereal section. And the crash begins, the clash of competing worlds: “One hundred kinds of sugar-flour when just yesterday I was talking to kids scraping for a meal; a world where shoppers can name more brands of cereal than human rights laws.” And I mutter: Reason that this is so? Unknown. Reason: none, literally. Conclusion: (the world is) unreasonable. And so it goes.

Everyone has ways of dealing with it. My students returning from overseas often break into tears in my class and office. Friends rage against the system. Some by writing what they know to be true, others by drowning their feelings in drugs and alcohol. And others still by leaving. The rules of what we can write and not-write, indeed of what we can see and not-see, chafe like straightjackets. Or worse. I think of my friend whose husband died from stepping on a landmine: she is expected to write him out of her thesis; or, if she writes him in, to write out emoting. She loves Renato Rosaldo, who refused to do either when his wife died in the field. Or my colleagues and students who live with the intangible but powerful traces of
tragedies witnessed, and are expected to adhere to a strict academic apartheid: write words, not traces. These people often love the work on subjectivities by Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Mamphela Ramphele, and Pamela Reynolds. Personally, I find works like Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* – that craft the larger truths of life lived through the creative interplay of non-fiction – powerful theoretically as well as poetically. As effective in the classroom as the more classical academic books. This seemed to me an excellent way to render into word the vibrant turbulence of research lived. Until I found out the academic presses I work with are not able to publish creative non-fiction under the title of anthropology.

Within all these considerations, I am continually astounded that we actually accept that a division *can* exist between theoretical and applied, between academic and activist, between Bao Ninh and ethnography; and that we – who write on the abuses of value hierarchies – allow them to be applied to these arbitrary divisions: this is cool, this isn’t. As if theory isn’t an interactive process that shapes what it comes into contact with – as if it isn’t activism. As if active work could ever be disentangled from epistemology.

Those first days back, the landscapes of my academic life look like barren wastelands; theory seems eviscerated, caring unacceptable.

And then we settle in. One eye always on the horizon.

And over coffee and the internet, most of the anthropologists I know, and certainly the ones I love best, promise that we will work to craft a new anthropology, forge a new kind of epistemology. Kinder, gentler: writing in the vibrancy of life and taking out the terrors of tenure competition and the brutality that can be found in the publishing world. The fact that with so much good will among so many good people the “gatekeeping rules” change so slowly gives pause: what, actually, is being served?

On days when I’m having an existential thunderstorm, with the winds of questions kicking up eddies in my mind, I wonder, “If I were going to make a discipline that had the ability to see the larger realities defining our worlds, both internal and external, and I wanted to make sure it had as little impact on the political world and its power systems as possible, what would I create?” And the answer for me is always the same: the academy as we know it today. A tenure system that makes people fearful and cowed. A publishing system with rules of jargon and distribution that ensure only a handful of fellow specialists will ever read the discipline’s works. And a personal system where competition rather than camaraderie is supported.

A system where not everyone matters.

And on those times when I’m struck by lightning in the storms of my mind, I have to laugh: we research and publish on people’s resistance to oppressive hierarchies around the world, while so often accepting the ones defining our own academic lives.

Who, I find myself asking again, will the future historians looking back on our era define as courageous? As world-creating?

I dedicated my last book to the war orphans like so many friends I have fought hard to maintain my own writing style the voice I like best the fact that the war orphans’ story has seen the light of day means the fight is worth it things change