



Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean (eds), *Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-0-8223-6329-3 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-8223-6340-8 (paper)

Writing is a powerful struggle. Finding words means locating truth, experience, violence, and possibility. Resonating across debates in geography and related fields, questions about research and writing practices have focused on the challenges and possibilities of representation and relations with others. How to tell stories ethically and powerfully while recognizing and negotiating uneven geographies of power, experience, and difference? Trying to navigate this terrain through writing – in a variety of forms – means writing in and through multiple genres, languages, identities, and with varying stakes. Perhaps the writing continues because embedded within these word worlds are ever more possible worlds.

In kinship with these struggles and possibilities, *Crumpled Paper Boat* explores ethnographic writing in anthropology. The book is itself an ethnography of writing, showing iterations of collaborative writing and reflection through its structure and form. The volume emerged from a School for Advanced Research (SAR) Advanced Seminar,¹ convened in 2013 by Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean. *Crumpled Paper Boat* encompasses a collaboratively written introduction, framing ten empirically based chapters written individually and interwoven with short reflections on those chapters written by other authors in the volume. As a whole, the collection offers an invitation to cast off as crumpled, imperfect and misshapen boats into the unknown potentialities of language. *Crumpled Paper Boat* is an attempt to trouble the focus on the “origin and destination” of anthropological writing (p.1). Instead, the volume aims to experiment within the multiple in-betweens of writing ethnography between origin and destination. It examines various literary impulses which are both longed for, and also kept at bay, in anthropological writing. The experiments within provide a shifting and looping atlas which

¹ See <https://sarweb.org/seminars/advanced/> (last accessed 8 February 2018).

will be generative for *Antipode* readers interested in ethnography, as well as perspectives on writing practices within and beyond research.

The book explores concerns central to anthropology's long engagement with ethnography: responsibility, voice, craft, reality, truth. Debates around these concerns are flagged and lightly traced in Pandian and McLean's Prologue and the Introduction, but circulate most potently in the various essays and reflections. Empirical examples question the nature of archives (chapters by Angela Garcia and McLean), practices of translation and transformation between languages and literatures (Stefania Pandolfo; Adrie Kusserow; Michael Jackson), as well as desire, excess and form (Pandian; Todd Ramón Ochoa; Tobias Hecht; Lisa Stevenson). For instance, Garcia's opening chapter about letters given to scholars in the doing of research distills questions of how to read, archive and write. Such concerns continue to intensify and expand throughout later chapters—for instance, in the discussions of what poetry allows and what ethnography allows in Kusserow's chapter, "Anthropoetry". Or within Pandolfo's chapter about the making and transformations of images within the context of the experience of madness in Morocco. When are words written, and how are sounds spoken? In Stevenson's chapter, "A Proper Message", it is spoken sounds which convey survival in the midst of deeply felt, embodied violences of the settler colonial state in Inuit Canada. Throughout all the chapters the work of assembling (a life, a text, a film, a poem, a death, the otherwise) is given shape on the page – as in McLean's poem, "Sea", which traces through memory and water the presence of the dead in Orkney.

The structure of the volume loops rather than draws a line, with a spacious opening out and out again even as the authors pivot and circle back to reflect on each other's chapters. Chapters are individually written, and each is followed by a short, several page reflection written by someone else in the workshop. Sometimes these reflections carry insights about the conversations underway during the workshop itself, revealing writing as a messy process, with inner debates and affects. Other times, the author might call out a particularly relevant and

perhaps vexing theme or struggle. These commentaries make the book. They provide vantage and perspective, and this rhythm of response turns out to be what this reader looks forward to most. Each time it feels as though one map in an atlas is being slightly redrawn, or one is pushed just a bit further from a stable shore. This relation between chapter and reflection hints at what scholarly discourse might be: a sustained and purposeful engagement in others' efforts – and sometimes fumbles – at representation, responsibility, truth, and connection.

Together the workshop participants develop a collaborative authorial voice – the Paper Boat Collective – through which the Introduction, “Archipelagos, a Voyage in Writing”, is crafted. This essay, whose production through a shared digital file is hinted at, weaves and splices into a singular voice. Here, differences are allowed to remain, to be proximate to one another, to sit on the page together. Sometimes these are called out, through formatting or shifting genre. For example, lines from a Carolyn Forché poem form an epigraph to a section on “Responsibility” (p.21). Passages offset and italicized offer reflection, questioning the authority of what comes before and after:

(Even these words, here, to whom do they belong? We can't say – they weave between and among us.) (p.14)

At other times the reader is left to discover and make sense of the differences underlying a shift in passage or example. The Paper Boat Collective writes, “With this volume and its experiments, we pursue writing that is captivated, vulnerable, and implicated, writing nurtured in pain and fear, writing that courts joy and seeks knowledge in the uncertainty and excess of attachment, writing that puts its authors, its readers, even itself, at risk” (p.14-15). Even as these risks are undertaken, there is a compassionate buoying of others on the parts of each individual author. The Paper Boat Collective feels a bit like a generous and unwieldy raft stitched together from individuals' favorite and troublesome passages. It also feels assembled out of the desire for a

safety in numbers as counterpoint to the loneliness of writing – offering one example for readers (and writers) wanting to join up with others.

Sheer delight and possibility in language forms the most striking thing about reading this book. First and foremost is the way in which words themselves are chosen. *Crumpled Paper Boat* sails through nouns such as sliver, hinge, detour, sensorium, lifeboat, thresholds, fidelity, valence, betrayal, doldrums, pleats. The actions of verbs home in, lurch, swell, flicker, cook down, unravel, tail, tend, provoke, envelop, render, skid, fold in on. And if not enough with these, adjectives give shape to nouns – flighty, patient, sensate, swaybacked, jarring, sclerotic, too much, speculative, insignificant, nimble. This may read as excess in the context of most social science academic writing, but the attention to single words embodies a playful insistence on pushing language beyond convention and ease. In these words there is a certain wagering of what a single word might do. The various authors seem to want to come to terms with what kind of force a word might have. The ways these words are then brought together on the page echoes throughout the chapters in phrasing, rhythm and repetition. The volume invites a more active reading practice because of these elements of form and experimentation. How it feels to read *Crumpled Paper Boat* – to inhabit this book for a time – embodies the very project itself: crossing or fusing genres, noticing formatting, remembering phrases and voices, making one’s own sense of the back and forth between writing and perspectives on the writing. This is not to say it is unclear, overly complicated, or too much to track. Rather, the experience of reading invites an appreciation of the whole.

What are the forms and force of writing, particularly its limits, silences and violences? *Crumpled Paper Boat* resonates with work in geography exploring text-based creative practice approaches as means to engage with sites and places (Marston and de Leeuw 2013; Cresswell 2014). For instance, Sarah de Leeuw’s (2017) recent call for “writing as righting” – where poetry in particular has the force to invite a refusal of linear and coherent narratives about colonialism. As de Leeuw argues, Anglophone geography’s stories of truth and reconciliation in the settler

colonial context most often veer toward quickly and neatly wrapping up violences into stable concepts and logics. Geography's ongoing and growing engagements with the humanities, poetry and creative practices more broadly – while opening up space for reflection on practices of writing – has the potential to do much more than reproduce “existing storied structures”. Rather, de Leeuw calls for especially non-Indigenous settler geographers to consider ways of telling stories which unsettle the comfortable ignorance “built on a legacy of colonial violence” (2017: 310). Thus, *Crumpled Paper Boat* will be of interest to geographers, poets, artists and writing practitioners, teachers, and others interested in the intersections between literature and geography.

The power of this volume may be in the way the struggles for finding words in ethnographic writing offer possibilities to “bend our concepts to the concepts of others” (p.5). How and when do we geographers open up concepts in our writing and research enough to bend toward the concepts of others? At which times, and for which others? It is this central aim and uneasy experiment which gives *Crumpled Paper Boat* life. In the volume's Prologue, Pandian and McLean briefly discuss Ruth Behar's (1997) observation about vulnerability as one of anthropology's worries and frustrations. The editors want to use this “vexation” with vulnerability and uncertainties on the part of the field of anthropology to “write more faithfully to life, to its ambiguity, uncertainty, and existential risk” (p.5). Pandian and McLean argue for exploration of the generative limits of this vexation – to see how “writing with the force of passage is what equips us to think otherwise” (p.5). Finding the words, the risks and the uncertainties – and sometimes even the small triumphs. How we might each engage others in these kinds of projects remains an open question – in other words, whose triumphs? And who defines those triumphs, failures, experiments? There is still much to learn about cultivating uncertainty, failure and collaboration in geographic writing and research, and this volume invites just this kind of casting off.

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