

# Tools to Shape Texts: What Creative Nonfiction Can Offer Ethnography

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**SUMMARY** *Drawing on the storytelling techniques of fiction to write about real events, creative nonfiction is a flourishing literary movement. This article examines how attention to the craft of creative nonfiction is potentially useful to ethnography. I present a few practical tools that may help ethnographers seeking to shape the materials of fieldwork: story, situation, persona, character, scene, and summary. I also ponder how to include background material without dense expository lumps. To show these tools in action, I offer a segment of my own ethnographic writing set in the Himalayan foothill region of Northwest India and present short selections from the writings of anthropologists who have reached wide interdisciplinary and popular audiences. [Keywords: ethnographic writing, creative nonfiction, narrative ethnography, oral traditions, history of anthropology]*

Toward the end of *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, Clifford Geertz observed, "It is not clear just what 'faction,' imaginative writing about real people in real places, exactly comes to beyond a clever coinage; but anthropology is going to have to find out if it is to continue as an intellectual force in contemporary culture" (1988:141). Looking out over the intellectual scene of the mid-1980s from his celebrated vantage point as cultural critic, Geertz was encouraging ethnographers to acknowledge a wider literary movement. This movement—which uses some of the storytelling techniques of fiction to write about actual events—first coalesced in the 1960s and early 1970s with the New Journalism advocated by Tom Wolfe and others, then gained momentum in subsequent years to inform assorted kinds of writing. The movement has come to include such genres as personal essays, memoirs, nature writing, travel writing, literary journalism, and cultural criticism, and is now institutionalized through courses, grants, writing degree tracks, and journals. While Geertz used the term *faction* this movement now also carries such labels as "nonfiction" (Zinsser 2006), "creative nonfiction" (Cheney 2001; Forche and Gerard 2001; Gutkind 2005; Talese and Lounsberry 1996), "the fourth genre" (Root and Steinberg 2005), and even, for some cases, the "New New Journalism" (Boynton 2005). I prefer *creative nonfiction*. In this article, I look to creative nonfiction for concrete writing strategies that might be useful to ethnographers.

Elsewhere, I've described the long history of anthropologists who have also written fiction, and argued that the writing of ethnography and of fiction may both be enriched by insights carried across the shifting borders between these genres established by institutional histories and expectations (Narayan 1999). Looking to creative nonfiction, which also draws on fictional techniques, I expand this argument to suggest a few practical tools that ethnographers might usefully borrow. To show these tools in action, I offer a segment of my own ethnographic writing set in Kangra, a Himalayan foothill region of Northwestern India. Also, I reproduce and discuss short selections from the writings of anthropologists who have reached broad interdisciplinary and popular audiences through trade publications. As Francine Prose has reminded us in *Reading Like a Writer* (2006), we all learn to write partly through reading. To locate well-written books by anthropologists inspires and instructs us as ethnographers even as we gain the intellectual armor of citing precedents.

### Situation, Story

"It's the pain of *so many* stitches," Sello said, enormous eyes widening further to flash emphasis. She looked up from her pillow, trying to find relief from searing pain by circling her knees under the white sheet. She was seven months pregnant, and her ongoing contractions had so alarmed doctors that they had stitched her cervix closed, then insisted that she leave her home for the hospital three hours away across the base of the mountains. Slight and fine boned, she now lay in the women's ward of a public hospital, her forehead damp in the summer heat of 2004. Around her, two parallel rows of beds held 14 other patients surrounded by their female relatives. The patients all wore regular clothes and their family attendants were also dressed as usual; the room was bright with patterned synthetic *salwar khomeez* outfits supplemented by swatches of color from the long *dupattas* trailing over shoulders or looped around faces. Conversations conducted mostly in the mountain dialect of Pahari burbled through the room. The overhead fans moved around sultry afternoon air that was tinged with the faint smells of disinfectant, urine, and spicy food.

I sat on a metal stool on one side of Sello's cot; on the other side, Sello's mother Urmilaji leaned attentively forward, a gray dupatta covering her gray hair, elbows resting on the mattress. Urmilaji was my old friend, whose abundant knowledge of local oral traditions had earlier inspired me to request from her all the folktales she knew. Later on I brought them together, along with our discussions about their meaning, in *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon* (1997). Whenever I visited my mother in Kangra, I made sure to spend time in Urmilaji's calm company, too. During each of these visits Urmilaji would ask, speaking Pahari, "Aren't you also going to write a book on our songs?"

"I don't know, really," I mumbled, too guilt ridden to properly explain that after publishing a sheaf of pre-tenure articles on Kangra women's narrative songs, and our book on stories, I had become preoccupied with other projects. I found myself restlessly moving between genres: from ethnography to fiction, from historical research on a woman folklorist to a family memoir.

"But our songs are so loveable!" Urmilaji insisted. "They are so full of wisdom!"

While Urmilaji's urging was characteristically gentle, other Kangra women friends could take a more chastising tone. When some of the women I had consulted two decades later as a first-year graduate student considering a dissertation on their songs learned that I had no book to show on this subject, they exclaimed, shaking their heads, "What, you haven't written your Ph.D. yet?" I was already a confirmed eccentric: unmarried at a hopelessly late age, and then childless, too. That I hadn't managed to deliver a book on songs only confirmed me as a befuddled figure of pity. Yet the more years I visited Kangra, and the more changes I observed in people's lives, the harder it seemed to craft a book from the abundant materials I had gathered during a year of field research on women's oral traditions in 1990–91.

Writers of personal narrative are especially familiar with the challenges of looking back through lived and gathered materials to highlight a story. Vivian Gornick's *The Situation and the Story* (2002:1) suggests a helpful analytic distinction. According to Gornick, "The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say" (2002:13). For ethnographers, I read the *situation* as the site of fieldwork, personal circumstances, the historical social circumstances, and prevailing theories about the subject of research; the *story* as the kinds of transformations that an ethnographer experiences, witnesses in others, or comprehends intellectually. (Unlike Gornick, I see plot as part of the story; in the interest of not getting bogged down in terminology, here I completely bypass how literary critics can use story in another way, as separate from narrative discourse.)

This distinction between situation and story helps us understand why the same fieldwork situation might produce multiple books by the same author, each following different stories. I think of Paul Stoller's lengthy association with the Songhay of Niger, first narrated at length in his classic fieldwork memoir *In Sorcery's Shadow* (Stoller and Olkes 1987). After publishing this memoir he revisited his situation multiple times to tell different stories in different genres. This distinction also helps us see why two different fieldworkers in the same locale and circumstances might see the central story of their work as quite different. Male anthropologists and their wives, for example, have shared roughly the same situation, yet have often chosen to highlight different stories (Tedlock 1994).

Gornick adds a crucial third element, the *persona* that transforms a situation into a story. Looking through her favorite writers of personal essays and memoir, she found that, "In each case the writer was possessed of an insight that organized the writing, and in each case a persona had been created to serve the insight" (2002:23). The essence of evaluating essays and memoirs, she discovered, was figuring out "who is speaking, what is being said, and what is the relation between the two" (2002:163). I interpret *persona* as the way the ethnographer presents herself as a character. Consider how Claude Lévi-Strauss establishes a persona as he begins his ethnographic travel memoir, *Tristes Tropiques*:

I hate traveling and explorers. Yet here I am proposing to tell the story of my expeditions. But how long it has taken me to make up my mind to do so! It is now fifteen years since I left Brazil for the last time and all during this period I have often planned to undertake the present work, but on each occasion a sort of shame and repugnance prevented me making a start. Why, I asked myself, should I give a

detailed account of so many trivial circumstances and insignificant happenings? Adventure has no place in the anthropologist's profession; it is merely one of those unavoidable drawbacks. [1977:3]

With these opening words, Lévi-Strauss's guiding authorial voice conjures up an intriguingly ornery and ironic persona. If he was compelled to write this book despite his "shame and repugnance," then we, as readers, are compelled to find out why. Even as he ironically declares that adventure isn't appropriate to professional anthropologists, we are promised "unavoidable" adventures in the pages that follow, and are lured to read onward.

Just as ethnographers must choose a persona to link our situations to stories, so too the people we work with cultivate personae in the personal stories that they offer us. As a contrast to Lévi-Strauss' opening words, consider these from Margery Shostak's life history of Nisa:

I lay there and felt the pains as they came, over and over again. Then I felt something wet, the beginning of the childbirth. I thought, "Ey hey, maybe it is the child." I got up, took a blanket and covered Tashay with it; he was still sleeping. Then I took another blanket and my smaller duiker skin covering and I left. Was I not the only one? The only other woman was Tashay's grandmother and was asleep in her hut. So, just as I was, I left. [Shostak 1983:1]

With the wry, forthright voice of her older self, Nisa presents the bewildered and brave young girl she once was, facing a first birth. When Marjorie Shostak takes over the narrative a few pages later, Nisa has already been established as a vivid presence about whom we want to learn more.

While all ethnographers extract, curtail, and rearrange materials from their fieldwork situations to make texts, perhaps it is in the editing of other people's stories that the interventions of an anthropologist as editor come into the clearest focus. Ruth Behar's candid description of transforming the Mexican peddler Esperanza's life story for publication is a reminder of the literary artistry involved in transforming fieldwork materials into a compelling story:

As I undid necklaces of words and restrung them, as I dressed up hours of rambling talk in elegant sentences and paragraphs of prose, as I snipped at the flow of talk stopping it sometimes for dramatic emphasis long before it had really stopped, I no longer knew where I stood on the border between fiction and nonfiction. [1992:16]

Rather than elaborate on the importance of editing in the transformation of situation to story, I move from Gornick's term *persona* to discuss *character*. While this is a term usually associated with fiction, character is also useful to consider in the realm of nonfiction.

## Character

In the course of my fieldwork in Kangra in 1990–1991, I had confided to my friend Vidhya Sharma that I was worried about finding an interesting form for writing an ethnography centered on women's songs. Vidhya was an avid reader of whatever Hindi books, magazines, and newspapers she could lay hands on in the village. "See a good book needs a 'hero,' a 'heroine,' and a 'villain,'" she advised, speaking Hindi but using the English terms. I thought that she was

referring to the novel I was then writing during any spare time I could find between fieldwork, field notes, and transcriptions of tapes. I said, "No, not a novel, a book about actual people and their lives." "That's what I'm saying," continued Vidhya, "Even then, to keep people's interest, you'll need a heroine, a hero, and a villain. You have to think of who your *villain* is. Maybe it's society. Maybe it's things that should be changed."

As I thought about my novel *Love, Stars and All That* (1994), I could see a heroine and yes, a hero, too, but I just couldn't discern a fixed villain. Certainly a few self-involved people preened their way through the book, bringing trouble to the heroine, but the book lacked a moustache-twirling blackguard of the sort that the word *villain* conjured. When I thought about my potential ethnography in these terms, I was even more at a loss. Through the years I continued to puzzle over Vidhya's advice. I now reinterpret her literary counsel in terms of central *characters* (like a heroine), what they *yearn* for, imagining that this might complete them (e.g., a hero), and *what stands in their way* (the villain, which, as Vidhya said, could be a constraining social force). Thinking in these terms, it's crucial to remember that people we might seek to represent as characters are always far more complex and have a life separate from our texts. However much we disguise people through pseudonyms or other identifying features, we are ethically accountable to them in ways that fiction writers can happily bypass.

Stranded in a hospital bed through sweltering days, Sello yearned for a safe delivery of a healthy baby. In the seven years since she had been married, she had given birth prematurely three times. Her first two babies, both boys, had died very soon after birth—life stirred and stilled in a setting where motherhood is a defining mark of a woman's status both in her extended family and society at large. Sello and her husband, who ran a small shoe store, learned of a shrine in Kulu district known to grant boons to grieving childless couples. They were told that if anyone asked them where they were going en route, their mission would be unsuccessful. They rode a bus across the mountain passes to seek blessings at this shrine and were relieved to arrive without any questions. They attributed the miraculous survival of their third premature child, a daughter, to divine intervention.

Now this cherished little girl with Sello's enormous eyes was five years old. Sello was again pregnant, and so filled with apprehension after her previous difficulties that an ulcer had made eating a challenge.

"There are so many women here in this ward," Sello said in Hindi, looking up from the low pillow as afternoon sun poured in heat from the window by her head. "And not one of them has the problems that I have." Tears moistened her eyes, and she blinked them away. "Not one."

"No, no, don't compare yourself," I said, alarmed by her swell of strong emotion. "Each life has different kinds of problems." I had gotten to know Sello when she was just 14 years old, as her mother Urmilaji's friend, and I found myself echoing Urmilaji's philosophy.

"I can't even stand up," Sello said fiercely. "My mother has to do everything for me. Some women come one day, deliver their babies, and are gone the next morning. I'm the only case like this in the whole hospital."

"Every one is experiencing their own karma," said Urmilaji in dialect, gazing at her daughter with what seemed like a soft swell of affection. "We don't know the reasons."

"It was my mother who told me to try again for another child," Sello continued, addressing me. "She said, 'Things are difficult for a single child. Try again. We'll go through this together.'"

As Urmilaji had promised, they were indeed "going through this together." Urmilaji kept vigil at her daughter's bedside through the hot days, cooked food at a relative's apartment to feed her daughter, and slept on the hard floor under the hospital cot at night. Because the hospital was so far from her home, Sello's husband and daughter could visit only on Sundays.

As their friend, related through the reciprocities of previous fieldwork, I visited the hospital each day when I was in the same town. Spending hours amid so many hugely pregnant women was especially ironic, as I had struggled for some years whenever I visited Kangra with queries, jokes, and even scoldings from village women about why I hadn't yet produced a child. To visit as the friend of an expectant grandmother seemed to raise me beyond such interrogations. Yet, as my advancing streaks of gray took on an orange tint of henna and I slid into the ranks of a more senior generation, I also felt increasing pressure to at least produce a book on the songs my friends had shared with me through the years.

Around dusk, Urmilaji set off to cook Sello dinner, and I started back toward where I was staying. We walked together in the fading light and cooling air along a back alley parallel to the traffic and bustle of the main bazaar; past sleeping stray dogs, strewn garbage, and clusters of children at play.

"I'm worried that Sello is so upset," I said. "It can't be good for her health to be so sad. How can we distract her?"

"Bring your work to the hospital," Urmilaji advised. "The songs." With a grave manner, she said that "Songs remind us that we all have difficulties, even the Gods."

I thought over her words as I walked further uphill. Among the many genres of songs in the Pahari mountain dialect I had taped, those I was most drawn to retold stories about goddesses, gods and assorted mythological characters. Each song focused on a segment of experience, often retold from the perspective of the female characters, in which a difficulty was faced and resolved.

E. M. Forster's distinction between flat and round characters in novels (1927:67-78) is usefully adapted into the realm of creative nonfiction, and by extension, ethnography. Flat characters, according to Forster, are types, caricatures who most often dramatize "a single idea or quality" (1927:67) while round characters have inner complexity, moral dilemmas, and the capacity for surprising transformations. In fiction, characters are built through such techniques as describing their physical peculiarities, habitual mannerisms, opinions they express, and ways they act. Usually, both flat and round characters populate a story. Similarly, viewing the Kangra songs as a corpus, I noticed that both flat and round characters filled the songs.

As ethnographers creating our personae, we have the choice to present ourselves as flat characters who strike a single recurring note: for example, perpetually astonished by the strange customs we encounter. It seems risky and even irrelevant to reveal ourselves as more complex characters. Yet as Phillip Lopate has argued, presenting ourselves as characters does not necessarily imply "self-absorbed navel-gazing, but rather a potential release from narcissism" that allows "sufficient distance to see yourself in the round: a necessary



precondition to transcending the ego" (2001:44). Lopate points out how mentioning certain quirks and obsessions can help establish us as characters, but as Philip Gerard (2001) also observes, presence in a text emerges partly from the narrative stance implicit in the point of view, the tone of voice, and how close or distant one is from events being described.

In a rich survey of more literary anthropological texts, Barbara Tedlock (1991) has traced the shift from the personal voice employed in ethnographic memoir to the dialogic processes reproduced in narrative ethnography: two different stances that both present characters, whether the center of gravity is more on the self or others. Several innovative collections of ethnographic stories focused on particular characters or events beautifully show how cultural forms and social structures inform people's lives (Abu-Lughod 1990; Friedl 1991; Gardner 1998).

While the genre of life history presents complex characters partly through their own stories, an ethnographer's portrayal nonetheless remains key. Here is how Sidney Mintz first introduces Don Taso in *Worker in the Cane*:

I recall how Taso looked that first afternoon. He was slight of build but his arms were heavily muscled and very tanned; his hands seemed almost grotesque, for he is a small-boned delicate man, and his hands would have looked fitting on a person twice his weight and size. His face was very wrinkled; when I found out later how young he really was I was shocked by the disparity I thought I saw between his age and his appearance. He had no teeth, and used a pair of badly fitting dentures with a lot of gold in them. He wore a white shirt—the badge of dignity of the Puerto Rican worker at rest—a rather natty but worn cream-colored fedora, shoes but no socks. [Mintz 1974:3]

Notice how Mintz skillfully uses physical detail to establish how a body carries signs of physical labor and how clothes establish class. In the same paragraph, Mintz adds further detail through close attention to Don Taso's lived setting in a one-room house divided by partitions, the family in the background as the two men speak, what he is offered to eat and drink, and their first conversation:

Don Taso talked freely about barrio politics, the union of sugar cane workers, work in the cane, life in the village. It was plain that he liked to talk. He managed somehow to understand my Spanish. He would rephrase my question to make it intelligible, check to see if I understood the rephrasing, and if I did and nodded, answer it. I was struck by his ease, his intelligence, and his articulateness; it seemed to me almost immediately that he was a remarkable man. [Mintz 1974:3–4]

Taso is revealed in these interactions with Mintz as an intelligent and kind man. When Mintz goes on to tell how trying to understand Taso's subsequent conversion to Pentecostal Church inspired him to elicit Taso's life story (1960:5–6), we too are intrigued and read forward, following Mintz to learn why.

### Scenes, Summaries, and Expository Lumps

Among the songs that I brought at Urmilaji's request to the hospital were some she had sung herself, years earlier. She also turned the pages of my file to a Devanagari transcription of a song I had taped from women singing together at a wedding in 1991. Sitting by the hospital bed, Urmilaji read the song aloud,

humming to recall a tune, and then raised the sheet of paper before her daughter, finger moving under the lines as she sang.

*lohe ki kadchi tambe se priti*  
 The dark iron ladle  
 is adored by copper  
 Be with me, Krishna  
 Let me adore you

I worry that bad times are upon me  
 but some time or the other  
 everyone is in trouble

Ram and Lakshman are loving brothers  
 When Sita was stolen  
 they were in trouble

The Five Pandavas are loving brothers  
 When they lost Draupadi  
 they were in trouble.

The moon and the sun are loving brothers  
 When caught in an eclipse  
 they are in trouble.

Starting with an image of a dark iron ladle dispensing nourishment and invoking the god Krishna with his dark-hued skin as a personal protector, the song describes the difficulties everyone faces at some point. This version of the song highlighted fraternal solidarity in Hindu mythology, describing how even the most devoted and supportive brothers sometimes encountered troubles. So Ram and Lakshman of the Ramayana together faced the challenge of finding Sita when she was kidnapped; the five Pandava brothers of the Mahabharata epic lost their joint wife Draupadi in a dice game; the sun or the moon are periodically swallowed in eclipses. When I had checked over a hasty transcription with the women who had informally joined together to sing this song, I had already learned that the song was expandable, moving beyond brothers, for one woman dictated another verse: "The King of Lanka was terribly proud/When Lanka was burned/he was in trouble." (Here, Ravana, King of Lanka, who abducted Sita to Lanka also faces adversity when the monkey God, Hanuman, burns up that fabulous golden city.) Looking at these earlier notes, Urmilaji offered another verse she recalled. Singing in a soft, high voice, she added:

The sandalwood tree is very arrogant  
 When a serpent wraps around it,  
 the tree is in trouble.

She paused, then playfully improvised a verse for the occasion:

Urmila and Sello are full of themselves,  
 When a child is being born  
 they are in trouble.

Urmilaji and I both laughed. Lying back against the bed, still enduring the pain of stitches, a momentary smile passed across Sello's face. Other singers had sometimes confided how songs gave them a sense of solace, showing they



were not alone in their predicaments. Seeing Urmilaji use and adapt my transcription showed me this insight in action. I was not sure how convinced her daughter was, though.

Creative nonfiction alternates between vivid, sensual, and detailed scenes, packed with description and dialogue, and narrative summaries. The memoirist and poet Judith Barrington expresses the contrast in cinematic terms, depicting the scene as being akin to “the close-up, the camera zooming in through the kitchen window, picking out the two figures talking at the table and going up really close to the face of first one speaker, then the other, while the audience hears one speak” (1997:82). The summary, on the other hand is “the long shot . . . that pulls back to a great distance, embracing first the whole house, then the street, then the neighborhood, and then becoming an aerial shot, it takes in the whole city and maybe the surrounding mountains too” (1997:81). Barrington also points out that such summaries allow one to move through swathes of time fast, while scenes slow down the action to dwell on details. When used together, the scenes enliven the summaries, and the summaries connect particular scenes.

To weave together scene and summary while tautly pacing a larger narrative and embedding an ethnographic point demands enormous skill. The famous opening passages that describe a police raid on a cockfight in Clifford Geertz’s article “Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight” beautifully illustrates the movement between summary and scene. The article begins with a summary of the Geertz’s arrival in Bali:

Early in April of 1958, my wife and I arrived, malarial and diffident, in a Balinese village we intended, as anthropologists, to study. A small place, about five hundred people, and relatively remote, it was its own world. We were intruders, professional ones, and the villagers dealt with us as Balinese seem always to deal with people not part of their life who yet press themselves upon them: as though we were not there. For them, and to a degree for ourselves, we were nonpersons, specters, invisible men. [1973:414]

The next two pages continue in the tone of an orienting summary, as the Geertz settle in, yet continue to remain nonpersons in a way remarked on earlier by Mead and Bateson. Then, about ten days after their arrival, they learn about a cockfight that will be held in a public square, and Geertz adds more background on the illegality of cockfights in Bali, explaining why such fights are usually held in secluded spaces. He then switches to a scene now embedded in the imaginations of most cultural anthropologists:

In the midst of the third match, with hundreds of people, including, still transparent, myself and my wife, fused into a single body around the ring, a superorganism in the literal sense, a truck full of policemen armed with machine guns roared up. Amid great screeching cries of “pulis! pulisi!” from the crowd, the policemen jumped out, and springing into the center of the ring, began to swing their guns around like gangsters in a motion picture, though not going so far as actually to fire them. The superorganism came instantly apart as its components scattered in all directions. People raced down the road, disappeared headfirst over walls, scrambled under platforms, folded themselves behind wicker screens, scuttled up coconut trees. Cocks armed with steel spurs sharp enough to cut off a finger or run a hole through a foot were running wildly around. Everything was dust and panic. [Geertz 1973:414–415]

After establishing this chaotic scene—taut with tension, vivid with verbs—Geertz places himself and Hildred Geertz inside the action:

On the established anthropological principle, “When in Rome,” my wife and I decided, only slightly less instantaneously than everyone else, that the thing to do was run too. We ran down the main village street, northward, away from where we were living, for we were on that side of the ring. About halfway down another fugitive ducked suddenly into a compound—his own, it turned out—and we, seeing nothing ahead of us but rice fields, open country, and a very high volcano, followed him. As the three of us came tumbling into the courtyard, his wife, who had apparently been through this sort of thing before, whipped out a table, a tablecloth, three chairs, and three cups of tea, and we all, without any explicit communication whatsoever, sat down, commenced to sip tea, and sought to compose ourselves. [Geertz 1973:415]

The scene continues with the arrival of the policemen, the Geertzes primly playing along with their host’s insistence that they were simply drinking tea and knew nothing of a cockfight. Then the narrative gathers the momentum of summary, jumping to the next day, when they learn that they are now greeted by others in the village who beg to hear endless repetitions of their account. From there, Geertz steps back to an even larger, generalizing summary, beginning, “In Bali, to be teased is to be accepted” and tells how finally he had achieved rapport (1973:416); by the next section, when he moves into his summary account of cockfighting as a cultural practice, the images from the dramatic scene still remain vividly present.

Theodor Rees Cheney advises that creative nonfiction writers watch for dramatic potential in scenes related to the kinds of events that he lays out in italicized rows:

<i>turning points</i>	<i>showdowns</i>	<i>arguments</i>
<i>flashbacks</i>	<i>disasters</i>	<i>hardships</i>
<i>successes</i>	<i>failures</i>	<i>life reversals</i>
<i>beginnings</i>	<i>births</i>	<i>deaths.</i>

[2001:55]

Looking back over fieldwork to find such scenes is to begin assembling the building blocks of a story, even as such dramatic moments may be a quick way to reveal character.

While summaries condense large swathes of narrative action, they also provide orienting overviews carrying necessary background information. Particularly when writing across cultural contexts and setting events within larger bodies of literature, summaries provide the wider frames that allow readers to appreciate the specificities of scenes. Yet, writing summaries, we face the challenge of what Ursula Le Guin (the science fiction writer and daughter of our anthropological ancestors Alfred and Theodora Kroeber) terms *expository lumps*, that is, explanatory and descriptive materials that occur in passages where information is “poured out as a lecture, barely concealed by some stupid device—‘oh Captain, do tell me how the anti-matter dissimulator works!’ and then he does, endlessly” (1998:119). Le Guin emphasizes that the trick to good writing is to “break up the information, grind it fine, and make it into bricks to build the story with” (1998:119). This is just what Geertz does in his

opening vignette, constantly slipping in asides about anthropologists, Balinese people, and cockfights so readers may better understand the action.

Piers Vitebsky's *The Reindeer People* (2005) documents grim state interventions in the lives of the Eveny and their reindeer in Siberia. Here is his opening scene of nomads with their reindeer.

In the Verkhoyansk Mountains of northeast Siberia, Eveny nomads are on the move. Teams of reindeer pull caravans of sledges down the steep slide of a frozen mountain river. Bells tinkle on the lead reindeer while dogs on short leashes dive closely alongside through the snow like dolphins beside a boat. One man sits on the lead sledge of each caravan, his right foot stretched out in front of him and his left foot resting on the runner ready to fend off hidden rocks and snagging roots. Passengers or cargo sit on the sledges behind. The passage of each caravan is visible from afar by a cloud of frozen reindeer breath.

This is the coldest inhabited place on earth, with winter temperatures falling to -96 F (-71 C). The ice is a condition of the water for eight months of the year and by January it is 6 feet thick. Throughout the winter, warm springs continue to break through the surface of rivers, where they erupt as frozen turquoise upswellings, like igneous intrusions in rock, and freeze into jagged obstructions. Caravan after caravan jolts over the last ridge of river ice and skims across a great frozen lake in an epic sweep stretching almost from shore to shore. Deep lakes provide a more level surface and the ice that forms from their still water glows black, marbled with milky white veins snaking into the depths. The sudden speed and the spray of ice crystals flung into our faces behind the hypnotic flash of the reindeer's skidding hooves make it easy to feel that we are about to take off and fly into the air. [Vitebsky 2005:5-6]

Notice how the scene is set amid energetic movement and vivid images. In the first paragraph, we are riding with the nomads. We hear the reindeer bells, see the dogs unexpectedly diving like dolphins, feel the possible jolt of the rocks and roots, and then pull back to the distant view of a cloud of reindeer breath. In the second paragraph, we receive background material, yet Vitebsky's flair for arresting images continues unabated: the turquoise veins of springs, the skimming caravans, the marbled surface of frozen lakes. By the end of the paragraph, a spray of ice crystals returns us to the bodily experience of rushing forward in a sled. Vitebsky's invocation of the sense of flying paves the way to his discussion of the ancient association between reindeers and flight, establishing a poignant backdrop to the changes imposed on Eveny lives.

Reading these passages with the eye of an ethnographic writer trying to learn how to avoid expository lumps, I see the wisdom of pouring in background when the narrative is already stirred into motion. Also, I see the value of attention to language: we have a better chance of enlivening summaries if we bypass clichéd and generalized adjectives in favor of very unexpected and specific images, continuing to draw on many senses.

## Conclusion

In *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, a book rich with practical tips and riveting examples, Theodor Rees Cheney states, "Creative nonfiction writers inform their readers by making the reading experience vivid, emotionally compelling, and enjoyable while sticking to the facts" (Cheney 2001:2). When I first read this statement, I reflected that "vivid, emotionally compelling, and enjoyable" are not

exactly attributes that come to mind for most ethnographies. The word “enjoyable” almost seems guiltily at odds with the professional duty that presses us forward. But on further reflection, I recalled how when I met with vivid and compelling anthropological writing as an undergraduate it drew me—and I suspect many others—to the field of anthropology. In the classes of Irving Goldman and Bradd Shore, reading the literary writings of Gladys Reichard, Ruth Benedict, Kenneth Read, Edward Schiefflin, Clifford Geertz, and Victor Turner inspired me to apply to graduate school (in which my shock on encountering Durkheim’s dry article on social facts as the year’s first reading can only be imagined).

When Geertz advised anthropologists to come to terms with creative nonfiction so as to retain a voice in contemporary cultural discourse, he did not elaborate on the kinds of imaginative writing that American anthropologists in particular have been engaged with for almost as long as the discipline itself. One need only think of the early example of Adolph Bandelier’s novel on prehistoric Pueblo culture, *The Delight Makers* (1892), or Elsie Clews Parsons’ edited collection *American Indian Life* (1922) that brings together short stories by distinguished anthropologists of the day (including “Papa” Franz Boas himself, recounting a not entirely gripping tale of an Eskimo group’s travails through the winter). Parsons intended this book to fill a gap she had herself experienced as an engaged reader: “Between . . . forbidding [ethnographic] monographs and the legends of Fenimore Cooper, what is there then to read for a girl who is going to spend her life among Indians or, in fact, for anyone who just wants to know about Indians?” (1922:1). Alfred Kroeber’s introductory comments begin by noting the focus on particular characters and the suspense of unfolding stories even while sticking to facts: though he does not use the term, his observations evoke creative nonfiction. He ends up, though, comparing the technique more to a novel:

The fictional form of presentation devised by the editor has definite merit. It allows a freedom in depicting or suggesting the thoughts and feelings of the Indian, such as is impossible in a formal scientific report. In fact, it incites to active psychological treatment, else the tale would lag. At the same time the customs depicted are never invented. Each author has adhered strictly to the social facts as he knew them. He has merely selected those that seemed most characteristic, and woven them into a plot around an imaginary Indian hero or heroine. The method is that of a historical novel, with emphasis on the history rather than the romance. [1967:13]

Ironically, though Kroeber insisted that “the most characteristic” facts were woven into plots around imaginary characters by the authors, closer examination of many of these stories reveal them to be minimally edited transcriptions of oral tales told by members of different Native American tribes to ethnographers. As a project, then, *American Indian Life* reminds us that as we look for ways to shape stories from the raw materials of fieldwork, the oral tales people have shared with us are inspiring starting points (cf. Narayan 2007).

As ethnographers, we are usually trained to set forth arguments, rather than to write narrative. We learn to use illustrative anecdotes, but not how to pace our representations of events to hold a reader’s interest. As we seek ways to craft narrative from fieldwork materials, it is useful to remember how stories gain power by piquing our basic curiosity about what happens next. Rather than give away the outcome in the opening pages of ethnography, we might

experiment with withholding. As Stan Holwitz, an editor at the University of California Press, says, "I always tell my authors to write a mystery. This means not giving everything away at the beginning, but leaving something for the end."

Inspired by Urmilaji's avid interest in song texts and her demonstration to me how these continued to bring meaning to people's lives, I left Kangra that summer and began drafting a first chapter of a book on songs. I was no longer ducking the ethnographer's role as what Nancy Scheper-Hughes (following John Berger, another brilliant writer of creative nonfiction) has termed the "clerk of the records" who witnesses other people's lives (1992:29). Beginning with the songs we had discussed amid the goings and comings in the hospital, I plunged into writing.

Telephoning Kangra from Madison, I continued to stay periodically informed of Sello's situation. Toward the due date, Urmilaji reported, the baby appeared to have stopped moving. "Then we were sad, after all the hard efforts (*mahinat*)," Urmilaji said, "Then the doctors did the ultrasounds and they said everything was okay. They opened the stitches. And this guest (*paraune*) has come."

She laughed again, the bright expansiveness of laughter buoyed high with relief. After all that uncertainty, Sello gave birth to a healthy, full-term boy.

Sello's little boy is now three, with his grandmother's calm demeanor, and I continue to progress with my ethnography on Kangra women's songs. On days that I am stuck, uncertain of the book's shape, I sometimes think of a verse in the song that Urmilaji seemed to have especially called to her daughter's attention.

I worry that bad times are upon me  
but some time or the other  
everyone is in trouble.

Amid the scale of troubles on this slowly spinning globe, not knowing how to proceed with writing is surely trivial. Yet in this experience of difficulty, as with others, a sense that other people have confronted similar predicaments helps one figure ways out.

I offer these terms—*story, situation, persona, character, scene, summary, and expository lump*—with the hope that they will prove helpful to fellow ethnographers.

## Notes

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