

Rocking the Boat

PANDIAN, ANAND and STUART MCLEAN, eds. 2017. *Crumpled paper boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. pp.242. ISBN: 978-8223-6340-8

It is a modest title, maybe, even self-effacing. A crumpled paper boat does not inspire with its swift and sure slicing through the waves, or by the grandiose power of a ship; it's a creature of whimsy and risk, the fleeting quotidian moment whose poignancy echoes in humble ripples. The image was borrowed from a line in Rimbaud's poem, "The Drunken Boat," and indeed, the poetic urge that seems to animate the "Paper Boat Collective" is one that sways and surfs on waves of words and images, deep and bracing. This is the sort of boat I imagine that Foucault had in mind when he wrote his essay 'On Other Places' (1986), in which he writes, "a ship is the heterotopia par excellence," a "place without a place" that is "given over to the infinity of the sea" (1986:27). "In civilization without boats," he continues, "dreams dry up, espionage takes place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates" (1986: 27). Dreams and adventure are passages to other worlds, other modes of knowing, altered states of being, new possibilities. And so the *Paper Boat* never seems to rest long in any harbor of theory or style, preferring the "spectral horizons, in-between and looking beyond" (19), beckoning the reader on a journey past well-charted shorelines of ethnographic convention and across a fragile fanning "archipelago" of loosely associated dots of imagination. "What we want," the authors write, "is an incontinent writing, words that face up to the threat of overflowing, the danger of being overrun" (25). How then, can ethnography, which so often stands in as the 'face' of the anthropologist, 'face up' to the crash of critiques still rippling from the wake of *Writing Culture*? The Paper Boat Collective's answer demonstrates that not only can ethnography survive, but by incorporating an aesthetic mode of uncertainty, vulnerability, and adventure, it is better equipped to connect with the violent storms and hopeful struggles of a complex and untidy world.

The experimental aesthetic is evident before the reader even embarks on the main text. The layout of the contents lists twenty-one dots on the itinerary, bookended by a Prologue and an Epilogue. The Prologue provides a launching point, with the editors boldly declaring "An ethnography carries beings of one world into another one" (1). From there, they set the tone for the Introduction, which extends and elaborates on the themes of transportation, transgression, and

transcendence.¹ The sense of journey is palpable in the persistent exhortation to go beyond: beyond the tangible, beyond the human, beyond oneself, beyond the real. Yet this call to move beyond, we are told, does not mean that ethnography, even in unconventional forms such as poetry or fiction, can or should neglect its empirical basis or its responsibility to those whose lives and worlds we seek to (and often fail to) inhabit. This is crucial, since, as Michael Jackson points out in his chapter, it throws the ethnographer into the conflict between their sense of responsibility to recognize their interlocutors with a humanistic sensitivity on the one hand, and the disciplining demands of scientific rigor on the other. The collected chapters do not resolve this dilemma, but by actively resisting closure, by constantly and carefully shifting voice and register, each, in its own way, creates something new.

One of the pleasures of reading *Crumpled Paper Boat* is imagining oneself in the company of the contributors, gathered around a table in an adobe bungalow in Santa Fe, New Mexico and telling stories-- some weaving, others unraveling it again. The atmosphere of relaxed camaraderie, outside of the contexts of academic precarity and professional pressures, not only allows the papers to take more playful risks than usual, but it transports the reader to a dreamlike intellectual exchange with fellow explorers, sharing in a utopian community. Angela Garcia is the first to tell her story, really a series of stories, told across times, places and media (telephone, letter, prison visitation). Here we not only find the expert interweaving of voices, but also the frayed edges, where voices and worlds fail to connect but remain or are kept waiting. Garcia demonstrates the possibilities for care in spite of, or even because of the lack clear answers about what to do when entrusted with stories. Adrié Kusserow's poetic intervention takes up this theme with a different kind of literary flexibility, her words carving out forms of intermediary and transitional spaces for ethnographic pondering. In doing so, she drums out the rhythms and disruptions that permeate the lives of displaced people and of the anthropologist who listens, keeps time, and deeply cares for the subject and is haunted by them. McLean's 'SEA' is the only other poetic entry in the book, and forces the reader even further into the confusing and alien terrain of image-making. SEA, writes McLean, is "an idiom through which the dead might speak" (166) not in ways that anchor them to the page, but that make them to move, crest and dissolve. In her response to SEA, Lisa Stevenson draws out the ways this stirring up of spectral voices can become a way of "tending the otherwise" by writing and writing again, "just as we walk and then begin to walk all over again."

The creative becoming of ethnographic subjects as mirror to the ethnographer and their work is a theme that runs throughout nearly all of the chapters, clearly evident in the work with artists (the chapters by Pandolfo and Pandian) but it is also strikingly evident in the kinds of imagination that animate the ecstatic rituals of the Bembe (Ochoa) and the inter-species intimacy of hunting (Gandolfo). Imagination, in all of its many textures and tones flows through these experiences, spilling out over the edges of the pages, resisting coherence and comprehensibility-- "Ethnography

struggles against its very lifeblood” write Gandolfo and Ochoa (187). Perhaps, as Tobias Hecht suggests in his chapter, fiction provides a better mode of capturing what overflow ethnography, engaging more directly and openly, as it does, with imagination and speculation (133). Lisa Stevenson’s chapter takes another approach, fragmenting and collaging images from fieldwork in ways that fight against a single interpretation or message, but suggest the haunting presence of something more that must remain unspoken. I am not sure if such inventive writing is, as Garcia argues, a form a “fidelity,” but it is a gesture of responsibility and of care, and as such, holds lessons for any ethnographer hoping to respond to the complexity of their encounters with other lives.

When speaking to non-anthropologists, I often find myself in a position of defending research methods that to others, are ‘merely’ anecdotal, haphazard, and idiosyncratic. Even within anthropology, many view more poetic writing with suspicion, an aesthetic decision that comes at the cost of analytical sharpness. Some readers of *Crumpled Paper Boat* may react the same way. Does ethnography sacrifice too much of its own identity and value by taking on the experimental forms of literary and cultural studies? Or can it emerge from its experiments reinvigorated with new possibilities for telling stories that can transport and even transform the reader? For those readers, including students, who are looking for inspiration to write and read ethnography differently, this book will not disappoint. As the contributors demonstrate, unsettling conventions gives stories openings to speak in new ways, or in ways that had not been adequately acknowledged in the past. To move the field forward, we would all do well to consider how this openness creates potential for our work to be heard.

References

Sharpe, Christina 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press.

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¹ Christina Sharpe’s (2016) use of “Trans*” explaining, “the asterix after the prefix ‘trans’ holds the place open for thinking (from and into that position [of the unthought])” (30).