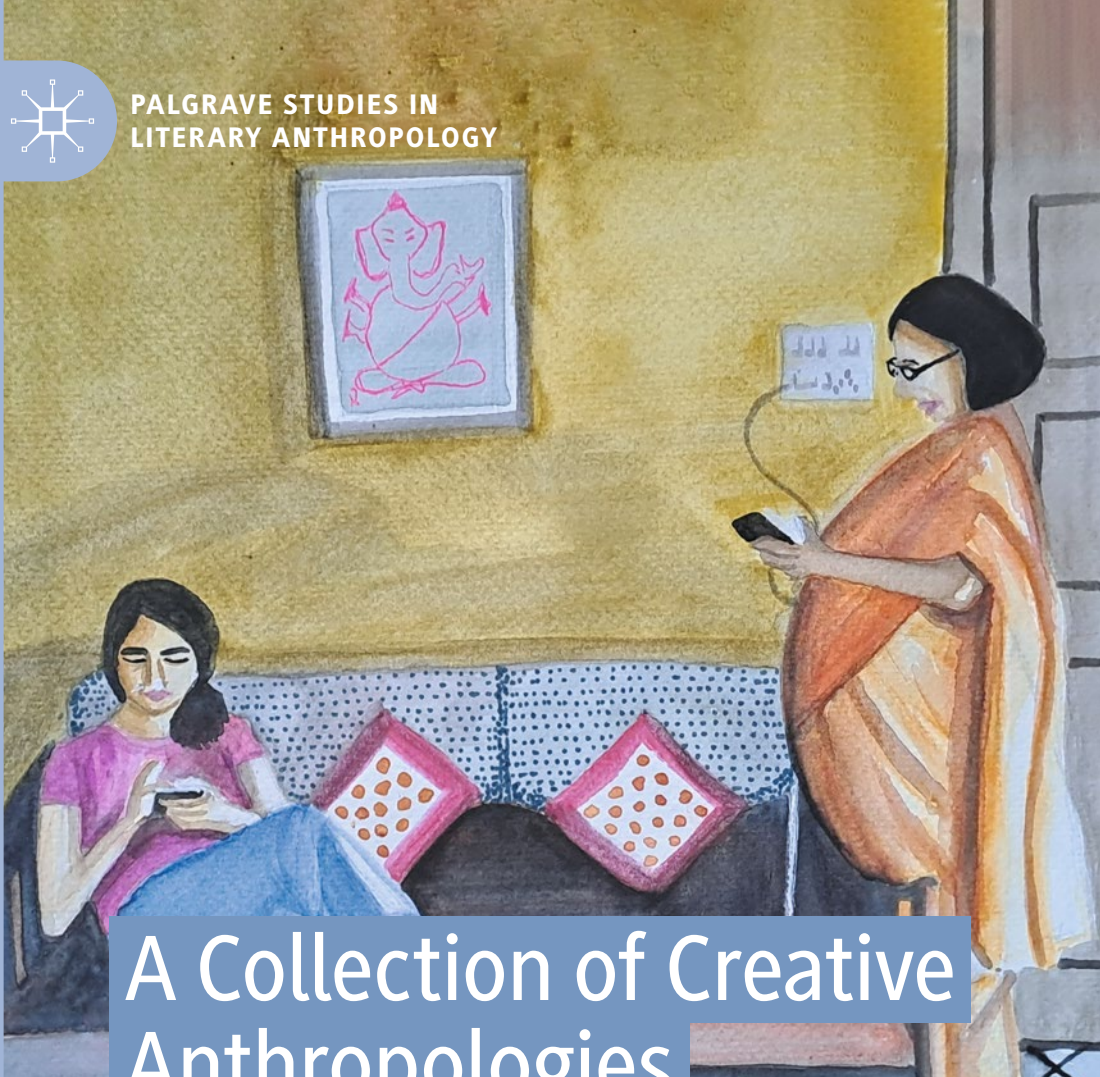




PALGRAVE STUDIES IN
LITERARY ANTHROPOLOGY



A Collection of Creative Anthropologies Drowning in Blue Light and Other Stories

Edited by Eva van Roekel · Fiona Murphy



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Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology

Series Editors

Deborah Reed-Danahay
Department of Anthropology
The State University of New York at Buffalo
Buffalo, NY, USA

Helena Wulff
Department of Social Anthropology
Stockholm University
Stockholm, Sweden

This series explores new ethnographic objects and emerging genres of writing at the intersection of literary and anthropological studies. Books in this series are grounded in ethnographic perspectives and the broader cross-cultural lens that anthropology brings to the study of reading and writing. The series explores the ethnography of fiction, ethnographic fiction, narrative ethnography, creative nonfiction, memoir, autoethnography, and the connections between travel literature and ethnographic writing.

Eva van Roekel • Fiona Murphy
Editors

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Editors

Eva van Roekel
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Fiona Murphy
Dublin City University
Dublin, Ireland

ISSN 2946-4218

ISSN 2946-4226 (electronic)

Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology

ISBN 978-3-031-55104-8

ISBN 978-3-031-55105-5 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-55105-5>

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For you

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Notes on Contributors

Aleeha Z. Ali is a South Asian anthropologist based at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Her PhD is an ethnography of Shi'ism and digitization that foregrounds ritual, sensory experience, and authenticity. She currently teaches at Amsterdam University College (AUC). Through her Substack blog, she explores sensuous writing as (auto)ethnographic practice and method of alternative knowledge-creation.

Darcy Alexandra is an award-winning poet and lecturer at the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Bern where she conducts multi-modal research in the Americas and Europe. Alexandra has worked as an adult educator, simultaneous interpreter, community organizer, and human rights investigator. Her current animated documentary, *The Woman You Look For*, will premiere in 2025.

Dilys Asamoah Amoabeng is a principal research assistant at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana. She is currently finalizing her PhD titled “Marriage Across Time: Transformation in the Ideals and Marriage Practices Among Ghanaian Middle-Class” at University of Amsterdam. Dilys is also a member of the Creative Anthropologies Network.

Amisah Zenabu Bakuri is a postdoctoral fellow at the Faculty of Religion and Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Her research focuses on migration, well-being, religion, sexuality, and health, particu-

larly within the Black and African diaspora. Bakuri also loves writing poems and sharing stories and insights on her YouTube channel @AfricansintheNetherlands.

Thiago Pinto Barbosa is an anthropologist based in Berlin. Thiago's research interests include racism and the interplay of power, politics, and science. Thiago is a member of the research group "Anthropology of Global Inequalities" at the University of Bayreuth and a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at Leipzig University.

Priyanka Borpujari is currently a PhD researcher at Dublin City University. Her research is at the intersection of ageing, gender, widowhood, and social media. She is also an award-winning journalist having reported from various parts of the world on issues of human rights and justice.

Irena Leisbet Ceridwen Connon is a social anthropologist and lecturer at the University of Stirling. Her research focuses on lived experiences of environmental disasters. She is interested in Scots, Welsh, and Welsh-English poetry and spoken verse as creative forms of sense-making, activism, and resistance in the contexts of socio-environmental change and crises.

James Cuffe is a techno-anthropologist in the School of Society, Politics and Ethics at University College Cork. His research focuses on the socio-cultural effects of technologies in different spaces, exhibiting his findings interpretatively at showcase events. He is an Irish Research Council (IRC) Laureate recipient for his project CyberSocial examining urban digital transition.

Urmilla Deshpande is working on a novel set in 1920s Berlin and a new translation of Irawati Karve's *Yuganta*. A biography of Karve with co-author Thiago Pinto Barbosa is forthcoming. Urmilla's work includes novels *Kashmir Blues* and *A Pack of Lies* and short story collections *Slither* and *Body and Blood*.

Horacio Esber is a lawyer and PhD candidate in Social Anthropology at Universidad Nacional de General San Martín. He works on human rights at the Ombudsman's Office of Argentina. He has published nine novels

and participated in the publications of various short stories, in both cases his fiction engages deeply with social issues.

Veronika Groke is an Austrian-born anthropologist and writer living in the United Kingdom. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in various online and print magazines, and her ethnographic monograph *Contested Community* was published by Lexington Books (2021). She is currently working on a novel based on Austrian myth and folklore.

Susanna M. Hoffman is a disaster anthropologist and author/editor of thirteen books, two popular nonfiction and five on food, two ethnographic films, and over forty articles. She launched the Risk and Disaster Group for the Society for Applied Anthropology (SFAA) and began and chairs the Commission on Risk and Disaster for the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnographic Sciences (IUAES).

Ana Ivasiuc is an anthropologist. She lived in five different countries and did research in two others. While experiencing being a stranger herself many times over (and a *sans-papiers* in France), she looked at how foreignness is constructed, mostly as a threat. She wrote poems about it as a cathartic act.

Michael Jackson is internationally renowned for his work in the field of existential anthropology and is widely praised for his innovations in ethnographic writing. His most recent books are *Friendship* and *Worlds Within and Worlds Without* (2024). He is currently senior research fellow in World Religions at Harvard Divinity School.

Kristina Jacobsen is Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology and Anthropology at the University of New Mexico, touring singer-songwriter, and Fulbright Scholar (US-Italy, 2019–2020). She released four albums of original songs and is editor, together with Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor, of *The Creative Ethnographer's Notebook* (Routledge 2024). She fronts the feminist honky-tonk band, The Merlettes.

Hilary Morgan V. Leathem is a writer and curator whose work appears in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Banshee*, and *Best Canadian Essays 2021*. Her research explores heritage cosmologies in Oaxaca. She holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Chicago and Poetry MA from Queen's University Belfast.

Carole McGranahan is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Colorado. She is the author of *Arrested Histories: Tibet, the CIA, and Memories of a Forgotten War* (2010), co-editor of *Imperial Formations* (2007) and *Ethnographies of U.S. Empire* (2018), and editor of *Writing Anthropology: Essays on Craft and Commitment* (2020).

Derek Moss is a fragment of David Berliner who is a Professor at Université Libre de Bruxelles. He writes about trauma, mental health, and academic life. Read, for example, “An Anthropologist for Dinner” <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/an-anthropologist-for-dinner> and “A Desire for Traces” <https://www.otherwisemag.com/traces>.

Nikki Mulder is a PhD candidate and teacher in cultural anthropology at Leiden University. Her research focuses on the intersection of finance and racial inequality in the United States and broadly engages with death, time, value, and kinship. Fiction is a recent but wildly exciting addition to her writing repertoire.

Fiona Murphy is an anthropologist at the School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies at Dublin City University. She works with Stolen Generations in Australia and people seeking asylum in Ireland, the United Kingdom, and Turkey. She has a particular passion for creative and public anthropologies. She is co-founder of the Creative Anthropologies Network.

Miriam Adelina Ocadiz Arriaga is a researcher and creative writer focused on migration and mobility from an (African) feminist and decolonial perspective. She has worked with Cubans and Brazilians in Mozambique, and she is currently collaborating with forced migrants in South Africa within the project Engaged Scholarship Narratives of Change.

Anand Pandian is Professor of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University. His books include *A Possible Anthropology: Methods for Uneasy Times* (2019) and the co-edited volume *Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing* (2017).

Charlie Rumsby is a multimodal anthropologist and Lecturer in Childhood and Youth at Sussex University. Pursuing a practice of public

anthropology, Charlie prioritizes interdisciplinary and non-academic collaborations to produce socially relevant, theoretically informed, and politically engaged ethnographic scholarship that is accessible to research participants and for audiences outside the academy.

Kayla Rush is Assistant Lecturer in Music at Dundalk Institute of Technology. She is an anthropologist of art, music, and performance, whose current research examines private, fees-based rock music schools. She delivers workshops in creative ethnographic writing practice throughout Ireland and internationally.

Paul Stoller is Professor of Anthropology at West Chester University and Center for Advanced Studies, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität/Erlangen-Nuremberg. He has focused on Songhay religion in Niger and West African street traders in New York. His most recent work *Wisdom from the Edge* (2023) blends narrative and analysis. The King of Sweden awarded him the Anders Retzius gold medal for his contributions to anthropology (2013).

Nomi Stone Poet and anthropologist Nomi Stone is the author of three books, most recently the poetry collection *Kill Class* (Tupelo, 2019), finalist for the Julie Suk Award, and the ethnography *Pinelandia: An Anthropology and Field Poetics of War and Empire*, first prize in the Middle East Studies Award from the American Anthropological Association (2023).

Maruška Svašek is Professor of Anthropology at Queens University Belfast, co-director of the Centre for Creative Ethnography, and co-founder of the Creative Anthropologies Network. Her research focuses on the affective relationality of people and things. Apart from scholarly work, she has published poems, paintings, a script, and an experimental film.

Ben Thomas is a digital illustrator and cartoonist. Ben's illustrations use the visual to offer alternative modes of (re)presentation to the written ethnographic text. His intimate drawings of the livelihoods of stateless people speak to the affective and physical geographies of ethnographic research.

Rich Thornton is an Economic and Social Research Council postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, School of Oriental and Asian Studies, University of London. His research focuses on neoliberal subjectivities in education development, especially in India. He also runs participatory theatre workshops, paints, draws, plays music, and lets the arts guide his relationship to knowledge.

Ioannis Tsioulakis is Reader in Anthropology and Ethnomusicology at Queen's University Belfast. He researches music creativity, labour, and crisis, in Greece and beyond. The included piece, "Hubris", is a collaborative production with *Pro/Schema* ensemble, a group of constantly relocating Greek musicians, recorded asynchronously between Belfast, Bristol, Frankfurt, and Athens.

Eva van Roekel became an anthropologist by accident. She films and writes short stories and sometimes a poem about life in Venezuela and Argentina, because she enjoys experimentation. Eva is currently an Assistant Professor at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and co-founder of the Creative Anthropologies Network. She publishes with Cordiviola when it comes to the fictional.

Susan Wardell is Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of Otago, in Aotearoa New Zealand. Her research interests include care, moral affect, health and disability, and digital sociality. Susan is published and awarded in several genres of creative writing and also experiments with visual and performance work.

Alisse Waterston is Presidential Scholar and Professor, John Jay College, City University of New York, and author or editor of seven books including the graphic novel, *Light in Dark Times: The Human Search for Meaning* (illustrated by Charlotte Corden) and *My Father's Wars: Migration, Memory, and the Violence of a Century*, an intimate ethnography.

Helena Wulff is Professor Emerita of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University. Her research interests include expressive cultural forms (dance, art, images, text, etc.). Key engagements are in the anthropologies of literature and writing. In addition to her academic work, she publishes autofiction, creative nonfiction, and other creative stories.

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Preface

The Wilderness of Creation: On How to Read This Book

Fiona Murphy and Eva van Roekel

The most regretful people on earth are those who felt the call to creative work, who felt their own creative power restive and uprising, and gave to it neither power nor time
—Mary Oliver

Close your eyes. Trace your fingers across the table of contents. Breathe. Pause. Let your finger land on the page. Open your eyes. Breathe. Pause. Poetry, music, song, short story, an essay—to where have you arrived? Select the piece you found through a serendipitous flick of hand. Turn the pages slowly as you pass by many different creative forms. Read, pause, find joy in it. Repeat this process when you need to. Creative work

F. Murphy (✉)
Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland
e-mail: fiona.b.murphy@dcu.ie

E. van Roekel
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: eva.van.roekel@vu.nl

is always a salve. Dip in and out. Let this book lie on your bedside locker or a coffee table. Let this book provoke your imagination. Let the contributions inspire in you a desire for experimentality, for creativity—to bring more creative anthropology into this world. Close your eyes once more. Trace the table of contents again. Choose again, pause again, breathe again, and this time listen.

Drowning in Blue Light and Other Stories is a collection of creative anthropologies anchored in experimentality and encouragement. A book that defies imaginaries of academic convention through the cultivation of a *mundus imaginalis* requiring moments of pause, of introspection, and of discomfort. In pushing, even at times, blurring boundaries of genre and form, this collection has the aim to unravel and unsettle. There is an intentionality bound up in this attempt to disrupt more traditional and accepted academic forms in creative collections such as this one. We (Fiona and Eva) have chosen to foreground experimentality in a non-hierarchical manner and without the academic reflex of explaining and contextualising each piece. As you (the reader) travel with the many contributions in this book, you will do so in the company of many new and seasoned creative anthropologists.

Onwards we go through the wilderness of creativity.

This book engages with anthropological imagination and with the questions of what creative anthropology is and, more importantly, how it is constituted—it is a glance into the creative endeavours of some anthropologists. Through presenting a multitude of multimodal creativities like drawings, music, short stories, poetry, theatre, creative nonfiction, this book has a documentary desire to ‘show’ some of the important creative work anthropologists are currently engaged in. The collection gathers anthropological voices from different parts of the world and from different career stages. This has culminated in a non-hierarchical repertoire of creativity which brings its own critical public weight to the work of anthropology. Through the lens of these kinds of creative articulations, we hope to meet anthropological critique anew—it is like pressing the refresh button and simultaneously reaching out beyond the discipline. Put differently, the question of what creative anthropologies can communicate about our discipline and the many worlds we belong to and what conventional academic writing cannot is answered in this book by

showing how ‘out of the wilderness of creativity’ we can produce alternative imaginaries of what anthropologists do and how they do it.

Another objective in this collective is to evolve the much-needed forms of public anthropological work through the practice of creativity. As such, much of the work in this book attempts to nurture a more radical imagination to cultivate new spaces of encounter through creativity, performance, and collaboration.¹ Some of this work is speculative, some of it more traditional, but all of it attempts to develop a different kind of understanding, even transformation of the promises and possibilities of anthropological work.

Collectively, as anthropologists writing and composing otherwise, we clearly do so cognisant of the long and varied histories of anthropologists working and performing in a creative vein.² As early as Elenore Smith Bowen’s anthropological novel *Return to Laughter* and Victor Turner’s ground-breaking call for an experimental and playful anthropology that addresses the full range of human life,³ the many traces of these works and the pathways that they carved only implicitly inform this project, but in a multitude of ways. Our contributions move within the shadows of these creative ancestors, those celebrated and cited but also those forgotten and erased. We write, we draw, and we compose knowing that all of these ancestors bequeathed the space and recognition for this kind of work in the discipline of anthropology. This is no small inheritance. “Trudging through the wilderness of creation” in the neoliberal university can be a dispiriting enterprise.⁴ For our precarious, early career colleagues, the challenges of committing to creative pathways are manifold, particularly when metrics and journal rankings fuel employment and promotion possibilities.

Nonetheless, we now seem to be witnessing a significant opening for creative work within wider social sciences and humanities, and anthropology in particular. A cursory glance at the programmes of major anthropological conferences reveals a plentitude of creative panels, labs, and roundtables, further widening the space and, indeed, acceptance of this kind of work. Historically, there have been few publishing outlets for creative work in anthropology (with the exception of *Anthropology and Humanism*) but this too is changing rapidly with many new publication spaces, such as *Sapiens* and *ThirdShelf Journal* (as but two examples) as

well as many established academic journals showcasing creative work more frequently. Creative anthropology also increasingly features in many anthropology syllabi, thereby cementing connection and collaboration on creative projects among students and teachers.

This collection joins this blossoming conversation in the form of individual anthropologists, creative centres, experimental creative journals, universities, and publishing houses committed to sharpening sites of creativity within broader scholarly spaces. Some scholarly associations are also increasingly supportive of creativity within academia. The editors of this book and many of its contributors are, for instance, members of the European Association of the Network of Social Anthropologists (EASA) and amongst the co-founders of the EASA Creative Anthropologies Network (CAN).

We are immensely grateful for this ongoing dialogue, encouragement, and support, in and outside academia. One special thanks goes to Alisse Waterston who has been involved in many things creative in her long career and has also been immensely important in the making of this book. The concrete idea of this collection of creative anthropologies arose out of the first Ethnographic Salon we co-organized with Alisse in the summer of 2022 during the bi-annual EASA conference in Belfast. It was a time after a period of long corona lockdowns that multitudes could gather again in a theatre and perform anthropology otherwise. Many of us present that afternoon had *drowned in blue light* as Susan Wardell poetically articulated in her flash fictions about work and life in front of a screen during the Covid-19 pandemic that poignantly opens this collection of creative anthropologies.

It is into these new spaces of creativity that we situate this book, fortuitously published in a series dedicated to showcasing literary anthropology in all of its diversity and experimentality. We want to specially thank Helena Wulff, one of the series editors, for her incredible support and encouragement for making this collection of creative anthropologies possible. Equally, there has been no editorial intent to impose coherence or aesthetic preference on how to work creatively. However, many of the creative contributions are punctuated by a dedication to experimentality—to honing a freedom from restrictive framings and imaginings of how creative anthropological practices should be. Such voices, we believe,

replenish and reformulate by unsettling conventions and customs through multiple kinds of creative endeavour. There is both courage and conviction in pushing the boundaries in this way to see what this may bring anthropology. Likewise, in *Anthropology off the Shelf*, Alisse Waterston and Maria Vesperi also call attention to an urgent need of writing anthropologically for the general public.⁵ We hope that this book continues this important conversation ignited in *Anthropology off the Shelf*.

Creative work is rewarding, often deeply meaningful work and we see this collection therefore as a form of ‘thick solidarity’.⁶ Following and crafting new creative paths in academia should not be a solitary one. Although written in different ways, at different times by a very different range of individual anthropologists, the voices herein strive to make creative anthropology a tool of reclamation and intimate engagement. But within these spaces of reclamation and intimacy there is still much more work to do. We hope that this collection will have pedagogical value for students—whose voices are also included herein—and established anthropologists that are fantasising about their first creative piece in their lifelong learning journey and work.

Finally, in coming together, we as editors and contributors to this volume have considered the relational economy (as it were) of creative endeavours within and to the discipline at large. How can our creative selves and creative works fashion a particular ethics of *being in relation* to our collaborators, interlocutors, and colleagues? This *being in relation* to by means of creativity is one grounded in encounter, exchange, practice, reflection, and interconnection. In a time of polycrises and uncertainties, we believe that this is needed more than ever. Ultimately, the challenge of how academic recognition works will continue to confront us given the degree to which creativity (often couched as innovation) is now also held captive by the hubris of neoliberalism. As such, working in a context where creativity is everywhere and nowhere at the same time, our concern in this collection is to transcend such divides. The pieces gathered in this collection do just this work. Rather than engaging in exhaustive interpretation of each creative piece and its broader implications as many introductions do, we will instead ask you to read, re-read, look, read out loud if you wish, and listen deeply. The sixteen short stories, eight (sets of) poems, one theatre play, four creative non-fictions, one set of colour

paintings, two music pieces, and one graphic novel excerpt gathered herein encourage you to actively participate in making your own interpretations, alignments, and meanings. Within these paperfolds of creativity, we very much hope that you, the reader, find inspiration, poeticism and imagination. This, we believe, will open the space for further conversations, encounters, and projects that strive to realise a more radically collaborative creative anthropology. A space that aspires to challenge the obstacles and negotiate tensions in current teaching, research, and publication outlets. The forging of this collection is thus also an attempt to keep exploring the wilderness of creative anthropology collectively.

Notes

1. See, for instance, similar creative calls in anthropology: Anand Pandian and Stuart Mclean, *Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Denielle Elliott and Dara Culhane, *A Different Kind of Ethnography. Imaginative Practices and Creative Methodologies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017); Yasmine Musharbash and Ilana Gershon, *Living with Monsters: Ethnographic Fiction about Real Monsters* (Goleta: Punctum Books, 2023); Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, *Between Art and Anthropology. Contemporary Ethnographic Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).
2. See, for instance: Ruth Behar, *Bridges to Cuba, Puentes a Cuba* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
3. Elenore Smith Bowen, *Return to Laughter. An Anthropological Novel* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954); Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ publications, 1987).
4. Mary Oliver, 'The Central Commitment Of The Creative Life,' in *Upstream. Selected Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 2016). Excerpt available at: <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?op=audio&tid=2442> Accessed 13/11/2023.
5. Alisse Waterston and Maria D. Vesperi, *Anthropology off the Shelf: Anthropologists on Writing* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
6. Rosena Liu and Savannah Shange, 'Toward Thick Solidarity: Theorizing Empathy in Social Justice Movements.' *Radical History Review*, 2018 (131): 189–198.



Drowning in Blue Light

Susan Wardell

Data//Daughter

Her daughter's body is made of data. She cradles this at night, now she has the device. She sleeps better feeling that tight wad of numbers tucked under pillow. Somehow the shape of it presses through the cotton and filling, through the skin of her temple, through the clean curved bone, and into the tangled grey matter of her dreams. It shines there like a vast blue sun.

By day her phone weighs in her pocket like a happy anchor. The data is a ridgeline, as she moves between work and school and home—rising and falling, but always there on the horizon. She is working hard to afford this microscopic/telescopic access: to afford the little white button that suckers onto her child's soft warm stomach, sending these precious signals, these signs of life, to her, all day long. Every ten days, she swaps this

S. Wardell (✉)

University of Otago, Otago, New Zealand

e-mail: susan.wardell@otago.ac.nz

device for an expensive clone, shucked from plastic packaging, as she sweats, and calculates.

To strangers it is plastic and wire. To her, this spindle sunk into interstitial fluid means that she can sleep, that her daughter can sleep, watched over by sensors that will SCREAM if her blood glucose levels fall off a cliff. Then they can rouse and inject insulin and *breathe...* and avoid another type of screaming that she knows would never, ever stop.

She tries to tell the people on the internet how much it is worth to her: this type of sleep, this type of trust. She summons up stories of a time before, when her daughter's body was a blanched mystery, a receding echo, in a hospital bed. She types and types, but the words seem small and distant on that moon-bright page, and somehow the other numbers—the ones linked to donations—stay very, very still.

Let the Light

He left my body first, and then he left me. But his words stayed, scattered around the bed—like cake crumbs, like used tissues—and keep getting stuck to the soft surface of my mind. So I confess my fatness. I let the light touch it. I ask the beady black eye of my phone to open wide, and swallow it whole. It travels through a tight blue tunnel and out the other side: to the internet, where everyone can wipe their dusty eyes on its ample folds.

* * *

Here are five ways to survive being fat. Number one, be very apologetic about it. Give your penance of tears at the public gate. Number two, be certain that it is temporary. In your mind, crawl out of it like a cocoon. Number three, when you are out of tears, offer sweat. Lay it out in vials, to be counted and measured. Number four, never call your body 'me'. Never show your face in the same place as your belly. Number five, cultivate hatred. But only in a room of silvered glass surfaces.

* * *

I remind myself of these rules, as I select the photo: my hair loose and shot through with gold, but rendered now in black and white, for sorrow and truth. My arms crossed modestly. My eyes downcast, in deference to those that will decide my face. I let my body fill the frame. I scaffold the words to hold it up. Then I place it on the platform altar, and I wait to see if, like prayer, it will turn into a blade... wait for the crowds to come by, to offer a judgement that will help me sear away the excess, the impurity.

* * *

If they fund the surgery, I will leave my body first. And then perhaps, I will leave myself.

They Weave Your Story and Give It to the World

Autumn crowds in around him. He is wearing a nice watch. He is wearing a nice suit, and over this, a cloak woven by his ancestors. His square hat casts a shadow over the soft plumage of native birds, the fine stitches of native fingers.

There are more shadows, the longer you look; the clocktower, rising up behind him, its fallen spectre lying long on the fallen leaves. His hands are clasped tidily: ready to be put to work. His future is within reach. But cancer is waiting too: under his organs, under his brown skin, under the tailored cloth, the feathers falling across his shoulders. It lies beyond the touch of daylight. A shadow on a hospital screen, eventually, but for now, unseen.

Scroll.

People stand nearby him, on the perimeter. He is wearing a winter coat. He is carrying books, sports equipment, and children's futures. The bell rings and rings, sections up his days, until the day that the surgeon comes. Then he lies down in a gown as thin and green as spring, and time

slips away, as he learns about things growing that aren't *meant* to grow. He in return, is stripped and shrunken.

Scroll.

Time turns further, digs in like a corkscrew, even with nothing to celebrate. The list of things they can afford to try gets smaller and smaller.

His *whanau* crowd around him. The sun is beating down on them all together, and it hurts, against skin thinned with love. So they bring words and photos, the things that don't decay. They stitch them up, weave them together, into a story, for a web page. For the world.

The photo of his graduation day is resurrected in the immortal perfection of pixels. It becomes less of a promise, and more of a plea. Who will gift him a future?

Scroll.

Pink and Blue

At work they print out a poster with a pink and blue flag, and my face in the middle, white and fluttering. Perhaps it is surrendering: to the asking, to the outing. To hope and scrutiny. Surrender is the quickest pathway to surgery.

I come in and out of the office with the trash bag each morning, and that other self smiles down at me from optimistic A4. Everyone can see it. Everyone is supposed to see it. It is the first breadcrumb. I wonder how many eyes it has captured, how many fingers it has sent tapping along html pathways towards the campaign page where I make jokes about the body parts I am fundraising to get rid of. When they get there, do they stare at my face? Noting how it is like this one, but different. Noting how I am like them, but different. When I am not in the room, they can look more closely. Are they confused by the shifting currents of my body? Are they readings its lines for evidence of suffering? Or possibility?

(How many trans people have you seen, in this small country? How many of us want to be seen, like this, by you?)

I empty waste baskets, as the boy on the poster looks on. A breeze ruffles past us both. I adjust my hair. None of this is permanent.

I am counting down the days till I lay my body upon the table. I am counting down the days till my story reaches its narrative climax, and I can finally close the book; a finished work.

The poster will be pulled off of its staples and crumpled up. Someone else will put it out with the morning trash. I will return to this place, looking more like me. I will not miss the doppelganger. And if you want to look, I will look right back.

Cthulucene

In his tiny, stitched-up chest, a flush of blood is encased in valiant muscle. There are no blankets, but it is cosy inside of him; the warm nestle of organs, all pink, red, and purple in their resting darkness, the tissues trembling in the shape of lungs.

Outside in the brightness, the tentacular embrace of wires, needles, sensors taped to newborn skin. In sleep he breathes like a frantic diver, struggling under the vast new weight of oxygen and space. The equipment keeps him narrowly afloat. Every few seconds it makes a solemn electronic proclamation, marking his tentative residence here. Still here.

Nearby is a woman who has become furniture. She is fixed on the regulation chair in the corner. Her hands, that cannot reach him behind his clear bubble, are instead clasping the tempered glass that houses miniature labyrinths where electron run their own mad circles.

She is stirring. The amulet opens its dark bubble of an eye. Through the heedy air, it takes everything in: the baby (thick sutured line, purple and gold with the anointments of iodine); the incubator (where someone has placed a toy rabbit, soft as childhood but with blank eyes); the room (where so many machines stand sentinel).

She holds it steady as it as it records. As it projects. As the image dies its own small death; is momentarily eaten, disassembled, into a dust swept off by algorithmic tides across the city, across the country, to be reborn, respawned, in a thousand other locations.

Out there, where it anchors, fingertips pink and warmed by pumping chests will pinch and scroll and tap on her baby's small body, lying half-open already to their gaze. Maybe some of them will add their embrace. Maybe hearts will beat, and keep beating. Keep beating.

Waves

Maruška Svašek



Photographs of waves by Alan Field

I would like to thank my collaborator, the photographer Alan Field, for his striking pictures of the waves, specially commissioned for this contribution. The visuals add an additional emotional layer to the flow of the poem.