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# WRITING ANTHROPOLOGY

A Call for Uninhibited  
Methods

**François Bouchetoux**





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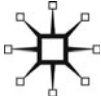


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*À Mémé Suzon et en mémoire de Pépé Roger, mythes fondateurs de notre tribu bellocoise.*

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## Preface

Dear anthropologist, student of anthropology, brother, I must warn you before you read further. Some pages in this little book might not be of your liking; perhaps they will even infuriate you, and if they do I would like you to picture my apologetic face. Far be it from me to hurt your feelings, or drown you in my stream of consciousness, or worse, put you off anthropology. My more benign intention is to recall some of the challenges inherent in writing cultural anthropology, and to offer a word of caution on the political correctness you are bound to come across in the field. To disturb political correctness, this mundane ingredient of socialisation in no way unique to ethnographic research, is to explore what structures the discipline and therefore respect it. So I request your lenience, dear reader, towards the hesitant narrative that follows. I shall not expect you to embrace my views but to critically evaluate them. Consider what you would accept and reject. I only hope to either shape or confirm your own convictions, whether they converge with, or recede from, mine.



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# 1

## Introduction

**Abstract:** *This chapter introduces the book as an essay that calls for uninhibited methods in anthropology. Such methods attempt to turn the inhibitions of Western writers, which originate from the guilt they experience in their relationships with the people they study, into a creative force rather than a burden.*

*The first chapter of the book will analyse methodological failures in which issues of reflexivity, reciprocity, sincerity, respect, and integration are at stake. The second chapter will build on this critique through the concept of “ethnogastritis” and outline strategies for integrating and writing the field.*

*In this introduction, the exoticism of Taiwan hints at the emotional kind of anthropology that the book intends to dwell on, and promote.*

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This book is an essay rather than a textbook. Although it deals with methods, it does not offer practical guidance for fieldwork; instead it suggests ways of thinking and writing the field, best read in conjunction with other methodological contributions and of course the monographs you are interested in. Specifically, it calls for uninhibited methods—methods that bypass the inertia of guilt, which in Western culture paralyses so much communication with, and understanding of, people. Brother! Do not be fooled by the peremptory style that permeates some passages. I have crafted them in an attempt to seduce you. As long as they inspire or maintain your idiosyncratic engagement with anthropology, my objective will be fulfilled. Trust me, I have used restraint when expressing my beliefs, without being able to identify what exactly caused such restraint. But it probably has to do with the very pitfalls this book outlines, and at the same time struggles to eschew. My position might appear to you as extreme *in* anthropology, but I suppose it only sketches some of the necessarily extreme positions *of* anthropology, which precisely make it the dynamic and exciting discipline it has always been. Read along, and make up your mind.

The book focuses on *relationships* broadly speaking, on what happens *between* the researchers and the researched. It is divided into two chapters. The first is a critique of anthropology from an existential and phenomenological point of view. It reviews tricky situations where anthropologists for some reason fail to establish satisfying rapport with people, leading them to reconsider what they do, or at least the ways in which they do it. Addressing issues of reflexivity, reciprocity, honesty, and respect, this first chapter suggests that anthropologists set themselves the task of integrating a community of adoption while feeling very guilty about it. Such integration, which they perceive as either deficient or excessive, nevertheless remains idealised in various methodological accounts. The second chapter builds on this critique to envisage strategies for integrating and writing the field. My research in a French advertising agency in 2005 and later experiences in Europe, Africa, and Asia inspired the argument, which harks back to positions explored in the 1980s when interactions between anthropology, literary studies, and philosophy were most intense. I view the boredom and miscommunications of fieldwork, reflected in the awkwardness of confessional writing, as symptoms of a malaise labelled “ethnogastritis.” More importantly, the symptoms of ethnogastritis include the seeds of its cure, namely

an eroticism of contingency that reveals the prospect of an anthropology relying on emotions, not discourse. I have injected a small dose of ethnogastritis in this second chapter, as a doctor would a vaccine, to rid writing of my own inhibitions and “heal” it. This procedure considers by implication the limits of writing, or what makes writing normal or acceptable. Here in other words, I tend to push writing out of the frame of the readable—extensive descriptions of nausea, in particular, will not go easy on you. They did not go easy on me either, and probably widened the discrepancy between who I am and what I write. Often I cannot recognise myself in what I write. I will probably read this page, later, thinking I have never met its author. I could not claim to plead my own cause, however, without the experimental flavour of this kind of writing. My own practices had to take into account, at the very least, the critique addressed in the first chapter. Further, the manoeuvre is ruthless but essential in that it probes whether everything can be told, and questions the boundaries of intimacy in recounting my actions and desires, and above all that of others.

Dear you, I wish I could see your face and hear your voice. I want to know you, and as you know I am only able to speak first. I already feel guilty about confining you to the role of listener. But I also assume you were prepared to find, when you opened this book, signs of my presence. Besides, this book precisely deals with guilt. So let me tell you a little bit about myself, and tell me, what else can I do? Whether you make something or nothing of what I share with you, you might as well take it and remember that not every gift is from heaven. When I first took an academic position in a British university, a colleague of mine used to tell me about his projects and I would comment on how busy he must be. Then he would often say: “Story of my life!” and I liked this expression, which contained a humoristic detachment from the reality of his life. At the same time, such detachment made me acutely aware of the basic tragedy of human relationships, and therefore of anthropology—I may become “other,” but never *the* other. I will never know and feel what my colleague knows and feels. I can only “access” him by means of the stories he is willing to share with me and my imperfect interpretation of his conducts. Furthermore, the story of his life continues but I am no longer there to hear it. I know he is alive, but as his story ended for me, so did our true relationship. I feel guilty of letting this relationship die.

## Taiwan, 2012

*I write from this beautiful island that has been so aptly called Formosa. A desire for exoticism brought me here, just as it led Victor Segalen to China. It is a land of steep mountains, forests, and dazzling sunshine; of teashops, friendly smiles, sweet aromas, dances, temples, street foods and convenience shops and chopsticks, sweating bodies, songs, rice fields, stray dogs and monkeys and cockroaches, goddesses, lunchboxes, scooters, raging waves, festivals, neon lights, betel nuts, hot springs, karaoke, and colourful fruits and colourful folklore. In this exotic utopia, my Empire of Signs, I have come face to face with myself. And through a dual movement of elevation and elation, I have discovered myself as other than I am. This movement reworks my memories and rouses bright images of the future. I can look back at the place I come from with the love it deserves; or more exactly perhaps, my imagination becomes this almighty gaze that embraces from above the people I cherish, and my old self among them. I am not escaping from the present. I only want to decide it. So it is not nostalgia or homesickness that I feel, but love of home, desire to wrap it with care as a mother would tuck her baby into bed. Nostalgia refers to times past, to an “elsewhen”. My mind is rather occupied with an “elsewhere” I know so well and moves on without me right now, perhaps becoming unrecognisable. Such nostalgia of the present, if you like, empowers me. My feeling of being-in-the-world (Dasein) eternally returns in different forms depending on my location.*

*I came to Taiwan to unburden myself of my certitudes and reinitialise my system, to unlearn and relearn, to doubt again and therefore think again and exist again (dubito, ergo cogito...). The “postmodern” vogue in the 1980s and 1990s has been very keen on doubt, building on the heritage of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—our great “masters of suspicion” in the words of Paul Ricoeur (1969: 149–150). Doubt had pervaded the spirit of Taoism long before them, and I like to persuade myself that the teachings of Chuang Tzu unconsciously shaped my desire to alight here. I am very suspicious of this thing called knowledge, and the Tao moves me (emotionally and physically). I have sympathies for concepts of critique and resistance, but also believe they acquire full significance in the context of voyage, on a tantalizingly slow and sometimes painful path to intellectual maturity, across an unknown land full of obstacles. I wander around, spend time with people, with monkeys, perhaps understand some, and misunderstand most. Trampling on my convictions, I strive to unshackle myself from the yoke of my self and think of the people I would need to live for. Erratically, I meditate on the human condition. The*