REVIEW ARTICLE

The bystander and the passerby Reflections on ethnographic writing and response-ability

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Berlant, Lauren and Kathleen Stewart. 2019. *The hundreds*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Pandian, Anand and Stuart McLean, eds. 2017. *Crumpled paper boat: Experiments in ethnographic writing*. Durham: Duke University Press.

How to characterize a recent glut of writing in anthropology, which is attentive to processes of writing? In the midst of a twenty-first century broadening of the “ethnographic” product to include, for example, visual, digital, graphic, performative, and auditory encounters, this return to the traditional valence of communicative practice might strike some as *démodé*. Besides the timeless accusation of navel-gazing, a creative bent to ethnographic process can appear to be a finite resource, with emergent forms of engagement taking priority. This is unhelpful, not least because it feeds into a fetish for academic newness but also because it arbitrarily groups all “new” forms of encounter together under the moniker “creative,” a term that varyingly functions as cute and playful, or occasionally, when resources are available, as somewhat epistemologically disruptive.

Just as Michael Jackson and Albert Piette (2015) refuse to nail down a unifying definition of “existential” in what they maintain is classifiable as “existential anthropology,” so too might

it be best to leave this literary reinvigoration to its multifarious devices, if only to preserve something of the energy that adheres to things before they are critically gestated and brought within the broader static folds of disciplinary lineage.

And so with this review we want to do more than take literature seriously, not least because we harbor a suspicion of how the rehearsed academic exercise of “taking seriously” can cramp up ethnographic writing. At the same time, we acknowledge that ethnographic writing can bog itself down in making too much of a show of its effort to excuse itself from conventions of representationalism. There is also the temptation to lean heavily on literature as some sort of worlding power that promises to reconcile ethnographic feats of documentary realism with forces, interlocutors, and events seemingly inimical to such a realism. It is along these fault lines of suspicion and temptation—fault lines that are perhaps more tripwire than tightrope—that our review of *Crumpled Paper Boat* (CPB) (2017)

and *The Hundreds* (2019) proceeds speculatively. We do this by drawing out the passerby and bystander as figurations of the sort of response-abilities these texts make possible when placed side by side.

Both *CPB* and *The Hundreds* are concerned with how problems of attention and understanding compel a deflection of writing through a range of “genres of the middle”—narrative prose fiction, montage, prose poem, constrained writing, fictocriticism, thought experiment, even drawing (Berlant and Stewart 2019: 28; Pandian and McLean 2017: 5). Each set of authors and collaborators variably expose readers to a generative space of partial recognition by conscientiously suspending critical distance in order to mobilize theory descriptively. This is a space where theory becomes lean and feral and words become precise in relation to what they cannot catch; here, detection and conjuration are no longer at cross purposes. In short, these authors show us how words matter.

It is in the interstitial space between these two books, where bookmark gives way to placeholder, that is, where words matter, that more than one reader—and more than a reader—is invoked, yielding multiple positions of response-ability to each book’s reinvigorated concern with creative writing.

The middle where we suddenly end up

Rather than discrete representational identities or mediating metaphors, think of the passerby and the bystander as conceptual personae (Deleuze and Guattari 1994), or what Brian Massumi in his translation of *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) renders as “rhythmic characters.” As rhythmic characters, the passerby and the bystander gesture to differential relations of passivity and activity—those that take form through literary impulse, voice, and presence—informing ethnographic sensibilities and craft. As such, the passerby and the bystander allow us to sketch tentative conceptual shapes around the sort of “active receptiv-

ity” (Berlant and Stewart 2019: 28) and “reckless contamination by circumstances” (Pandian and McLean 2017: 3) that emerge as possibilities of response, what we call response-abilities, in both ethnographic work and writing. The passerby and the bystander evoke not only the stakes of a creative impulse but an anxiety of an affirmed obligation to it as well. And so the point of our double entendre becomes clear: our response-abilities dovetail with disciplinary responsibilities.

As conceptual personae or rhythmic characters for these response-abilities, the passerby and the bystander gesture to ways of coming and going or else lingering with/in and in/between these texts. This is a with/-in-/between that appears as the middle where we suddenly end up (Berlant and Stewart 2019: 41). More placeholder than bookmark, this is the place where things elbow their way in and out of plain sight, goaded as much by the play of distraction and attention as by the forcefield of a few well-placed and well-timed words.

In what follows we conjure this interstitial space with/-in-/between these texts by invoking the passerby and the bystander as a series of juxtapositions between two writing registers. The attentiveness of the formal book review is periodically interrupted by a more elliptically epigrammatic running commentary that recasts the interplay between attention and distraction as an artifice of this collaboration.

Bystander (a/e)ffects: Reading that (with)stands at attention

The bystander is someone who is present at a scene or event but does not intervene. As a potential witness, however, the bystander is always passively implicated in what transpires. When called on as a witness the bystander must assume an identity in order to be credible or else risk being held in contempt. Bystanders always face the risk of becoming collateral or accessories to a scene or event. In this sense they personify the atmosphere

of every unexpected happening. At the very least a bystander's presence can turn a scene into a spectacle.

CPB opens with a preface written collaboratively by all ten authors. The book is a product of a seminar at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, which brought its authors together at the same place that gave rise to the writing culture collaboration three decades earlier. These writers, all of whom are anthropologists by training, are not oblivious to these parallels. They are tangled up with the critiques of the writing culture moment, the various formations of power that ethnographic writing must negotiate. But they do not simply offer an updated version of that text. This is both because disciplinary and global circumstances have changed since the 1980s (so how could they?) and because where the *Writing Culture* volume fostered a suspicion of writing and what it might cover up, the *CPB* collective is more positively concerned with what a careful attention to writing might afford.

In *The Hundreds*, by contrast, Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart do not cite the *Writing Culture* volume at all, an absence that might be taken as a sign of the book's orientation toward an unspecified reader, as opposed to a disciplinary trajectory. *The Hundreds* is correspondence, while *CPB* is a collaboration. It is personal, while *CPB* is relational, and it is particular where *CPB* is global. Or, if you will indulge us here, it is the passerby to the *CPB*'s bystander. The authors offer us a montage of vignettes with filaments of thought echoing around its one hundred chapters (or "makings" as the authors refer to them). Each of these makings is itself written in denominations of one hundred words, though the question of who has authored which remains obscure except in those instances where the authors refer to each other or themselves, often by first name, a strikingly intimate posture for an academic work.

Look, the bystander gestures to a specific kind of reading encounter. Readers of *CPB* are welcomed to "linger at great

length" (Pandian and McLean 2017: 6) in an archipelago made up of the fragmentary reflections and stylistic experiments of accomplished writers and ethnographers. Each contributing text can be read as an island in this archipelago where each island is also an active volcano. The interludes interspersed between chapters are dinghies ferrying readers-anthropologists to—or from, it is hard to tell—these volatile islands. The reader is struck with the impression that these sorts of experiments can only ever sink or swim, while only the minor celebrities of a discipline will likely remain afloat.

Life in writing must endure and be endured both off land and overboard. Pandian and McLean claim a spirit of textual adventure for this endurance. Indeed, transportation and transformation underwrite *CPB* as both a promise and an occupational hazard. Readers are encouraged to linger at great length in the shipwreck of a tradition still hemorrhaging its treasures, watching with suspended disbelief as one volcano (*Writing Culture*) becomes many.

But tourist-voyeurs we are not.

Insofar as accountability belongs more to word count than to the impossible inheritance of a disciplinary tradition, *The Hundreds* alternatively compels us to get carried away with it, to come and go, and not always as we please (not least because "the ordinary captivates us as an atmosphere or practice we may or may not take to." (Berlant and Stewart 2019: 17)

It is easy, where the craft of writing is concerned, to slide into a tender nostalgia for the materiality of pencil and paper. But *The Hundreds* might more productively be read on a computer. Jump searching words to trace their discharge lets you read across rather than through the text, appropriate considering the way it pits itself against the constrictions of narrative in both content and form. This is how you might dis-

cover the importance of dogs, for instance. The transitory encounters a person has while out for a dog walk are ripe for the sort of quotidian affects that occasion pause in this book. Reading across, in addition to through, engenders a condition of multiplicity legitimated by the four distinct indexes that conclude the book. The final four pages are also left blank for the reader to construct their own index as they see fit.

As zealous readers affected by the spirit of textual adventure, our fear is not that we'll get lost but more that we'll get nowhere real fast (getting lost is a matter of course, of course!). We watch with apprehension and desire as writers invoke the literary impulse into spectacular feats of ethnographic writing. Our ambivalence is only partly attributable to the sort of "reckless contamination by circumstances" which we are being asked to risk, that such writing calls for (McLean and Pandian 2017: 3). More to the point is the question of responsibility (response-ability) that vexes our attempts as ethnographers to invoke the literary impulse as a means of conveying our observations into words that can obviate analytical distinctions between the real and the really made up. How do we invoke the literary impulse as a modality of ethnographic writing without drawing too much attention to this invocation as an alibi for compelling our readers to suspend disbelief? In essence then this question of responsibility (response-ability) is a question of ethnographic propriety: "what can I get (carried) away with?"

Readers of Stewart are likely to be reminded of *Ordinary Affects* (2007) and placed side by side, the prose in question might be hard to distinguish from this foundational work. The self-imposed constraint of one hundred-word segments, while perhaps being overemphasized in its effect on the final outcome, nevertheless makes for fragmentary writing conducive to subject matter, which hedges against worlding,

against critique, against explanation, and against tidy teleologies, among the other limitations imposed by narration and politics. Though perhaps it would be unfair to frame this book as an "against" when it is so carefully positive and attentive to things that simply do not fit the criteria of conventional ethnographic writing. Berlant and Stewart are beyond using the familiar territory of critique as a foil for the imagination. They are otherwise concerned, but helpfully signpost a few traditional scholarly intentions for readers who have a thirst for structures of argumentation: "you can't get to the bottom of things, just at the thick of them and the gravity that pulls them, and you, along." (Berlant and Stewart 2019: 43) Here is one indication of the place that their pens dwell.

This interstitial space is nicely paralleled in the work of the *CPB*, whose recent self-titled collective output similarly foregrounds that peculiar admixture of writing, empiricism, and potentiality that is at the heart of a recent re-invigorated attention to ethnographic writing. At times for both of these books the primacy of writing risks spiraling into a morass of creative writing about writing creatively. Too much time spent dwelling on the methods of noticing or processes of putting pen to paper risks relegating this book to a meditation on reflexivity, devoid of the demonstrative content that would make all of its points more forcefully and more enjoyably. But in each case the authors pacify these sorts of impulsive doubts with a refusal to be stamped by the signature of an oppositional statement, relying instead on the dynamism of their empirical orientation.

Lisa Stevenson is quite explicit in her commitment to the stories, or "images" as she calls them, which hold together in a "textual montage" that unfolds before the reader. These are stories of communicative possibility, loss, and family ties between the Canadian North and the sanatoriums of Southern Ontario in the mid-twentieth century. Stevenson strives to avoid abstraction altogether, no small feat, and for her efforts readers are rewarded with an engrossing and provocative account.

For some, like Garcia, it is other peoples' written words that form the basis of reflection. Garcia tells the story of a box of letters bestowed upon her by Bernadette, a friend and interlocutor, whose prison sentence is the basis of a written correspondence between mother and daughter that Garcia is witness to. Garcia's own words and her interspersed childhood memories mingle with Bernadette's as she is pushed to confront questions at the confluence of their shared and disparate experiences.

Others in the *CPB* collective approach writing more reflexively, as a task the ethnographer must confront whether or not their interlocutors are similarly concerned. Such is the case with Kusserow, whose "anthropoems" confront the stark realities of life for Sudanese refugees. Kusserow openly wonders what use poetry can be for those about whom it is written: "Does the ethnographic poet dare to consider whether such poetry would be understandable or usable by the disempowered it describes?" (Kusserow 2017: 80).

These ethical questions are furthered by Michael Jackson through recourse to an age-old opposition at risk of being reified, between our scientific and humanistic aspirations as ethnographers. Jackson offers a word of caution against straying too far toward the latter, or as he puts it in reference to *Alice in Wonderland*, he is "troubled by the idea of a grin without a cat" (Jackson 2017: 48). Can we do justice to the need to balance the iconoclasm of new approaches to ethnographic writing with the fidelity we all no doubt hope to convey with respect to our interlocutors and their experiences? And can we do this while effectively negotiating the sort of imperialism that comes with borrowing from what is not clearly ours to borrow? These are not new questions. They recall Lila Abu-Lughod's (1991) response to the *Writing Culture* moment wherein she advocates not only for a recognition of "partial-truths," as Clifford had, but of their positionality as well. The ethical implications of creative writing are on display in most of these accounts, though they are most effectively confronted where positionality is

negotiated in ethnographic description rather than in expository theoretical reflection. In this respect the contributions by Garcia and Stefania Pandolfo shine.

Betrayal is endemic to ethnographic practice such that fidelity to the real is less a matter of a disciplinary policing of the conventions of fact and fiction than it is a commitment to "infuse language with the presence of other lives and density of their worlds." (Berlant and Stewart 2019: 8) Pay attention to how each author enacts this commitment assiduously, as if heeding Maurice Blanchot's (1980: 132) counsel that, "there is a limit at which the exercise of an art, whatever it be, becomes an insult to misfortune."

This insistence on an empirical field, rather than a purely subjective or fictional one, for example, is an important aspect of both books. While the monism of capital T Truth is subverted by all the transitory entanglements that complicate its smooth surface, so too do the authors of these works refuse to simply slide into the easy oppositional language of reflexive subjectivity or to construct an ontologically cohesive elsewhere. Rather, the deference is to a space that remains open-ended and unfinished, where writing "becomes a means of marking and maintaining an openness to events, surprises, and contingencies, to a reality that is as much a source of questions and provocations as of answers" (Pandian and McLean 2017: 4).

In their attention to the surpluses that exceed form, these books bear more affinity to what has recently been called the "Anthropology of becoming" (Biehl and Locke 2017). Parsing Deleuze et al. (1997: 225), Pandian and McLean note: "Writing is inseparable from becoming . . . always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed" (2017: 4). Perhaps more to the point is Stewart and Berlant's admonition to "stop apologizing for wanting to live speculatively" (2019: 16).

It is one thing to stop apologizing for wanting a speculative life, and another to refuse the apology for living that life. Shoring up our defenses we watch on from a “critical distance” with more desire than apprehension as the gymnasiarchs of our discipline make volcano islands appear habitable, worlds apart. A bystander (a/e)ffect.

But let’s be clear, these reservations are not particular to a discipline’s woeful novitiates incessantly fending off their own bad writing. And so the question of responsibility (response-ability) breaks up on impact: what is our complicity in letting others choose what kind of reading encounters we have? Or can we read among volcanoes knowing that writing is always a partially magnetized traversal, sometimes eclipsed by critique and the hostile space that it conjures? I would be happy to be taken to volcanic islands if I could see the “witches flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 41) circling above. . . . Selective receptivity to the new ordinary is the task of the reader as much as the writer, and in reading we reveal the means by which fidelity becomes the outer limit of our receptivity.

Passing by: Distractions of the new ordinary

There is room in this writing for voices to come and go. . . . Necessarily recursive, it fashions itself like a tuning fork that learns its notes through small, incremental experiments made in fits and starts. —Kathleen Stewart, from the epilogue to *CPB* (2017: 227)

Although this excerpt belongs to the epilogue of *CPB*, it is perhaps more in tune with *The Hundreds*, where the writerly experiment is more free-ranging and capacious, luring its readers into the immediate vicinity of its makings. *The*

Hundreds performs a collaborative experiment of constrained writing that riffs off the drabble in pursuit of the open-ended impact of things (words, thoughts, people, objects, ideas) that incessantly verge together and come apart, “jumping into relation but remaining unglued” (Berlant and Stewart 2019: 126). The motive force for such experimentation is “thinking that goes sideways” (Berlant and Stewart 2019: 22), marking an elsewhere rather than arriving.

What sort of comportment can one assume in a place like this, always on the move in the middle where we suddenly end up? What remains of this compulsive coming and going that can convey “a picture of the energetics of thought/matter’s movement” (Berlant and Stewart 2019: 51)? Pay attention because the hundreds we encounter are not exactly images but rather the felt momentum of their transformation, dispersal, and withdrawal in a pure outside where we are exposed to the precision of language’s own edge (“an ecology of energetic precisions”; Berlant and Stewart 2019: 22); where language spreads forth while the discrete subject/author fragments, risks disappearing in that naked space of attention and mischief we call play. To play and be outplayed, as far from error as from truth, errant and itinerant.

The Hundreds considers how to attend to the incessant erosion of an outside that takes the transitive form of a nonbinding bond to the ordinary, that is, to what is equally impactful and incidental, obscure and accessible, immanent and fleeting, and fragmentary overall. As we read in “Fish in Drag”: “Any attempt to delineate in words even the smallest moment—a greeting in the street, the opening of a window, the startling sound the world slips in—necessarily leaves out more than it includes, which is nothing to despair about” (Berlant and Stewart 2019: 60). In short, the ordinary is what overtakes us in passing us by. What is called for then is a renewed writerly means of attending to things on the move—an askesis of conjuring what is detected in passing (us by).

To be susceptible to the attraction of the new ordinary demands a stance of active receptivity that the passerby stands as a conceptual persona for. Like the new ordinary, the passerby is defined by being so remarkably unsuspecting. The passerby is the one always coming and going, without established allegiance but not exactly indifferent either. The passerby conveys a passive readiness to participate by virtue of their constitutive non-belonging.¹ As such the passerby gestures to the fugitive element of every crowd. The passerby looks around but cannot be said to do so as spectator or witness; even when loitering around, the passerby's attention is rarely fixed for very long. More the trace than that someone who leaves it, the passerby recalls Breton's Nadja, more anomalous than anonymous.

What is so attractive about the passerby as a rhythmic character of the new ordinary is their constitutive negligence. How could this attraction not be essentially negligent, looking around and being overlooked, leaving things where they are, passing time in "a thinking that goes sideways," both itinerant and errant? Negligence here bears no moral sanction. We take it from Foucault's (1987) essay on Blanchot. It is a force of attraction immanent to the outside, which as Foucault (1987: 23) insists, in praising Blanchot's fictions, is "never in things or in people but in the impossible verisimilitude that lies between them": encounters, the proximity of what is furthest away, what or who passes us by in our very midst—the passerby, emissary of the new ordinary.

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Note

1. Thanks to Naisargi N. Dave, whose interest in the figure of the passerby prompted a correspondence that has informed our present formulation.

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