

ACCIDENTAL ETHNOGRAFICTION: REFLECTIONS ON THE VALUE OF CREATIVE WRITING IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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My dad is an avid hiker,¹ and loves to nip over a fence if it allows him to explore more inviting terrain and to improvise an interesting variation on the route he had initially intended. Inheriting that gene, I have always been resistant to purportedly-firm boundaries in academia, and compelled by a curiosity to discover what happens when different disciplinary colours get mixed up in new palettes.

When my novel, *The Invisible Crowd* (Figure 1), was awarded a Victor Turner Prize for ethnographic writing, despite the fact that I had not consciously intended it as such during the composition process, it felt like a legitimization of the creative writing techniques that I had been using in my ‘academic’ anthropological work.

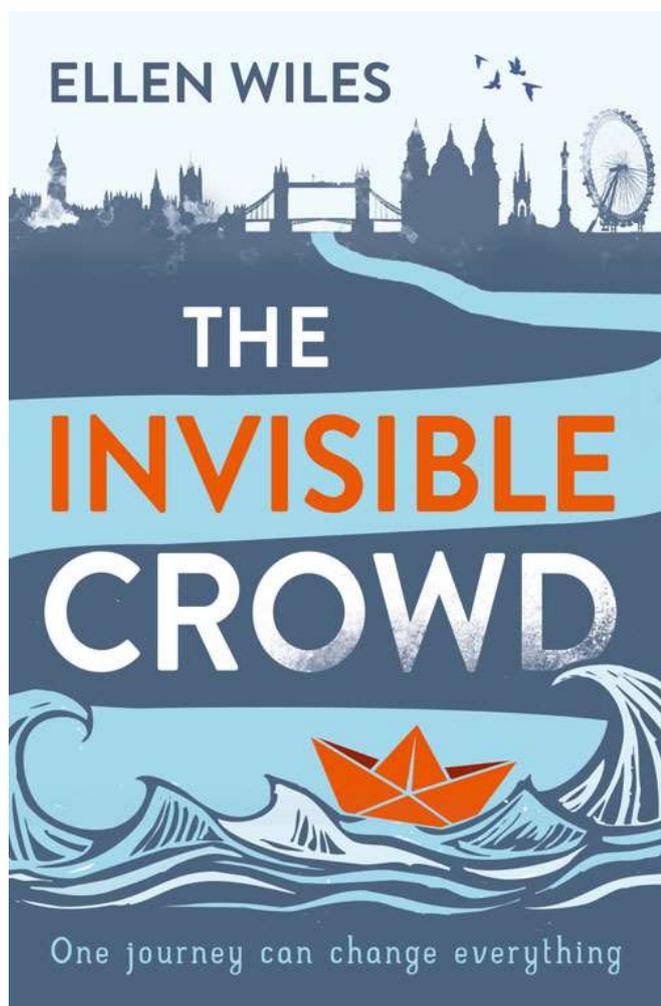


Figure 1: Cover image of *The Invisible Crowd* (2017).
Image courtesy of HarperCollins Publishers.

I have since discovered that many other anthropologists long to bring more creative writing techniques into their practice but fear it will have a negative impact on their academic careers. When I taught a creative writing workshop at the 2018 AAA Meeting it was packed with anthropologists ranging from postdoctoral students to seasoned professors – and many of the latter confessed to having wished for years that they could have incorporated more creative writing into their work, but felt too constrained by the particular publishing expectations linked to their progress in the academy. Now that they’d made it to the top of the greasy pole, though, they felt ready to take the plunge. I have since been contacted by a number of postgraduate and early career anthropologists from around the world confiding their wish to bring more poetics into their writing.

With these people in mind, this special issue seems like a good place to reflect back on how I came to write my accidental work of ethnografiction (Wulff 2014); and also to advocate for the benefits of a creative and interdisciplinary perspective on writing anthropology, fiction, and other slippery genres.

This inquiry has led me to dial right back and ask myself: where did my anthropological impulse first come from?

Perhaps it was the moment when, in my last year of school, I spun our globe around to Africa, stuck my finger roughly in the middle, found that I had landed on Zambia, and decided to go there to work and travel for a year before starting university – I was utterly ignorant about the country, but felt a need to experience a way of life that was as different as possible to the one that I knew. But why did I want to do such a thing? Perhaps that links back to when my parents whisked me out of primary school and stuck me in a small village school in France for six months, where neither the teachers nor pupils spoke a word of English, and when I didn't speak a word of French – as an outsider, this made me see culture differently. Or perhaps my anthropological bent is most closely linked to my love of reading fiction, and the sensation of stepping into the shoes of characters with utterly different backgrounds and characteristics to my own.

After my time in Zambia, I studied Music in Oxford, as originally planned, but soon after that, I came across a book about an international human rights barrister that switched on a bulb in my brain. *That* was the career for me, I decided: it would give me the chance to 'change the world' (I was still young and idealistic) by telling stories about individual lives around the globe, and the consequences of the various socio-legal systems in which they lived. While I was studying law, I went off to do several human rights legal projects abroad. In Botswana, I assisted in the Kalahari Bushmen's trial, contesting their eviction by the Government from their ancestral lands. In northern Thailand, I worked in a large refugee camp for Karenni people, helping to develop a fairer in-camp legal system in a context where the refugee judges were melding traditional dispute resolution practices, linked with their spiritual traditions, with more adversarial Western legal procedures.

Back in London I started practising as a barrister – but while I was doing my pupillage (a kind of apprenticeship), I kept on thinking about my experiences of living and working in other parts of the world, and mulling over questions around cultural relativism, law and experience. I applied for funding for a doctorate at Cambridge in law and anthropology, drawing on my Thailand work, and was awarded funding, but reluctantly turned it down under pressure to accept a tenancy in chambers.

As a fully-fledged barrister, I was bombarded with work, and enjoyed much of it – yet I had already begun taking furtive creative writing courses on the side. I would write bits and pieces whenever I could snatch a moment, on buses and trains, and on weekends. I felt a growing compulsion to break out of my new world of ultra-rational legalistic thinking and writing, which was constantly stimulating, yet often left me feeling as if I'd been conscripted into an incessant puzzle-solving workout. I wanted the space to think more freely and write more imaginatively about the ideas I was encountering. I had a growing sense that the practise of law tended to neglect the connection between legal frameworks and the human emotions, ideas and experiences at play in individual cases, and that, to me at least, this mattered.

One case I was working on fired my imagination more than the rest: an Eritrean asylum appeal. I became engrossed in it, and in the other precedent cases I was reading about involving Eritreans who had fled and managed to reach the UK against all the odds. As I became aware of how shamefully little I really knew about their experiences, the idea for my novel, *The Invisible Crowd*, seeded itself in my brain.

I'd had no idea about the astonishing and tragic history and politics of the state of Eritrea – which had achieved independence from Ethiopia after a thirty-year war, while their soldiers wore plastic sandals and created schools for their children in trenches. But neither did I have any real understanding of the terrifying and dramatic life experiences of thousands of Eritreans in the UK, many of whom who had, against all the odds, made it over here alive and physically intact, and were now trying hard to make a life for themselves. I became aware of how many people were hiding beneath the radar, either because they had not claimed asylum, for reasons including fear of the authorities and the consequences; or because they had vanished from the immigration system after having their claims refused, or while experiencing years of delay as they waited for a decision – during which time they were expected to live on a meagre amount of vouchers, and forbidden to do any paid work, however well-educated, qualified, skilled or experienced they were. All this gave me a new perspective on the British asylum system.

I began to think about the dominant narratives about asylum seekers and immigration, and I was particularly struck by two disjunctions that appeared to me like clashing pieces of wallpaper covering a cavernous hole in the brickwork. One derived from the legalistic language and form of the documents I was poring over. While these documents had revealed a lot to me, in terms of information, they concealed a lot, too; given the linguistic and formal minimalism with which they were composed, they couldn't give me a fraction of the insight into the sensation, the emotion and the *meaning* of asylum seekers' individual and collective experiences that I now wanted to access. They represented the tip of an iceberg of feeling.

The other disjunction was between these legal narratives and the mainstream media narratives about asylum seekers, which were most evident in a prolific array of tabloid headlines. These headlines, and the stories that followed, tended to be sensationalist, overblown, and distorting of the realities I was now reading about in my legal work; and yet they were often the sole narratives about asylum seekers being accessed by many British people. I had long registered these headlines as being disturbing examples of nationalistic and racist scapegoating, but now they leapt out at me as if in 3D, striking in their cultural dominance, and I began checking regularly for the next monstrosity to be published. *Leeches, swarms, hoards, floods*, and other such metaphors, alluding to insect infestations and cultural desecration, were slogged across front pages. More often than not, asylum seekers were said to be defrauding British taxpayers to live lives of luxury in vast mansions; or bludgeoning attractive white British women to death with hammers and chopping up their bodies.²

It dawned on me that I could try writing a novel, involving an Eritrean asylum seeker character, that would explore the immigration and asylum system in the UK and the culture in which it operated, and that this might serve to provide a counter-narrative that – unlike the legal cases I was reading – could be accessible to a wider audience.

I began to read all the novels I could about refugee and asylum seeker experiences. I was surprised at how few were published, at least at the time. Novels about refugee journeys were increasing slowly, but almost none of them featured Eritreans.³ There were hardly any English language novels set in the UK that explored contemporary asylum seekers' experiences, and that engaged with these polarising media narratives that now preoccupied me – or with how oppressive the British immigration system must be if you have to battle it as an asylum seeker. Of the few novels that did engage with such experiences, most were bleak in tone, and seemed to paint their characters' lives in grayscale, making

them gruelling reads. Even so, they offered an emotion-centred insight into the asylum system that felt vitally important.

As I developed my own outline novel idea, I began researching – and my research would lead me far beyond the case law I was already working on. It would span years and take many forms. I began volunteering at the Refugee Council in London, helping to teach an English class to women seeking asylum, including Eritrean women. I began going to Eritrean churches and events, like their annual Martyrs' Day celebration. I spoke to and interviewed a lot of people, including several journalists who'd fled Eritrea, and who generously told me at length about their experiences. I read non-fiction books and plays and memoirs about Eritrea, and by Eritreans, and countless online articles.

I soon decided that the form my novel needed to take was polyphonic: it would feature multiple narrators – not just my Eritrean character, Yonas, and a British character, Nina, but many other people who would meet Yonas on his journey in the UK, all of whom would have different perspectives on immigration, and divergent experiences of it. This led to new and proliferating realms of research, including interviewing a Conservative MP, a Home Office Presenting Officer, and a bin man, and reading a myriad of books and articles and interviews.

Later, once I had done a Masters in Creative Writing alongside my legal work, I taught some creative writing workshops in an immigration detention centre, and witnessed their prison-like architecture first hand. I shuddered in the knowledge that the unique, expressive group of people I was speaking to could all be detained there indefinitely, even if they had committed no crime.

My research with asylum seekers confirmed to me – even more than I had expected – what fascinating, complex and vibrant humans they often are; and how this was often lost in the legal and media narratives about them. Despite the extreme trauma that many asylum seekers I met had suffered, and the psychological and physical difficulties they continued to experience while they waited to hear whether they could stay, they almost never came across, in conversation, as the glowering, gloomy shadow-people they were often made out to be. They were multidimensional, often larger-than-life – many had developed an impressive ability to crack a joke, or just to break out into laughter, in order to get them through the worst of times; and yet they were highly sensitive to the various demeaning ways in which they were treated, and damaged by their traumatic experiences. I wanted to bring out these kinds of qualities in my fictional characters. I was keen to explore the incredible resilience many of them had built up; and yet how some were far less resilient than others, and how easily the more vulnerable could be crushed by an oppressive immigration system like moths under a boot.

I wanted to do this through fiction in a way that got as close to the 'truth' as possible – in terms of emotional truth, that is, but an emotional truth that was closely situated in reality. I tried to write *The Invisible Crowd* in such a way that, while all the characters were invented, and most of the events they experienced were invented, all the situations they found themselves in *could* realistically have happened under the British immigration system as I had observed and understood it, and as it was legally and factually constructed. I carefully factored key elements of the immigration system into my narrative. To better illustrate the disjunction of many asylum seekers' realities with mainstream media narratives, I decided to include real newspaper headlines, for parodic effect, at the start of each chapter.

Meanwhile, over the years of working on this novel, I became more involved with ethnography and anthropology in my academic work. My first book, *Saffron Shadows and Salvaged Scripts: Literary Life in Myanmar Under Censorship and in Transition* (Columbia University Press, 2015) emerged, unexpectedly, while I was doing human rights legal work in Myanmar in 2013. I had been hunting largely unsuccessfully for books of fiction in translation, and then met a group of literary writers who were eager to share their work in translation with the world. They had astounding stories to tell about their lives and work under censorship, and how the military regime had affected their creative lives and writing. My book combines interviews with these writers about their lives and work with new translations, framed by my own descriptive context. It was only as I was writing the introduction and conclusion to *Saffron Shadows* that it dawned on me that my project was fundamentally anthropological, and that the book I was about to produce could accurately be described as a literary ethnography.

I finally ceased practising law in 2015 in order to begin a PhD alongside my creative writing. I was based in a Publishing Studies department, but my work oriented strongly towards literary anthropology. I was fascinated to learn more about anthropology's evolution (see Wiles 2018), including how it wrestled with its identity as a social science vs. a humanities subject; and its vibrant creative strand, featuring scholars writing in literary and experimental modes. I discovered anthropological writing that felt alive (Narayan 2012), multi-sensory (Stoller 1997), experiential (Jackson 1989, 2017), writing that set out to move and engage readers (Behar 1997), and writing that explored the relationships between anthropology and literature.⁴

My next book, *Live Literature*, based on my doctoral research, will be an anthropological exploration of contemporary literary culture, drawing upon a variety of fields from neuroscience and performance studies to cultural and publishing studies. Although it is a non-fiction monograph, it centres around two experiential literary ethnographies of literary events that are composed using creative writing techniques.

Having now published academic articles, a monograph and a work of ethnografiction, all of which can be seen as within the domain of anthropology, I feel – perhaps even more keenly – that fiction has a unique power and resonance, in itself, and as a form of ethnography. Fiction has an unmatched capacity to delve down into the rich complexity of individual human psychology, emotion, sensation and thought, across a diversity of characters, as those characters intersect with, shape and are shaped by the system and culture around them; and also to explore, through plot and narrative, the ways in which those relationships evolve over time. This gives fiction access to vital experiential dimensions of culture and society that other ethnographic forms cannot access.

Fiction also has a distinct capacity to engage and to *move* its readers, through a process of deep identification with characters who are 'other' than themselves, whereby those characters appear at once fundamentally different and fundamentally familiar. In other words, fiction causes readers to empathise, and to empathise radically. Neuroscientific research has revealed the unique extent to which reading fiction does this, by developing readers' 'Theory of Mind' (see Zunshine 2006) – essentially the activity of empathy. For ethnographers who are seeking to contribute to social and cultural change, this is a kind of superpower which is all the more resonant in a digitalized world, in which we are all constantly bombarded with information, making it harder and harder to capture audiences' attention, to move them, and to change minds.

Having said all that, I remain drawn to write critically-oriented work as part of the academy – though I take care to avoid academese, and often bring creative writing techniques into my scholarly work.⁵ I am resistant to the idea that there is, or needs to be, a clear boundary line between fiction and non-fiction; or between literary non-fiction and ethnography. While these conceptual categories are useful, they can never be absolute. There is a rich seam of narrative categorized as creative non-fiction, for instance, that is ethnographic in sentiment and ambition, and that is profoundly moving, partly through engaging with character and deploying immersive language and inventive forms in novelistic ways. A stellar example is Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012): a non-fiction book set in a Mumbai slum, where Boo worked for years as a journalist, and that focuses on the story of a 'real' boy who lived there, through a literary mode of storytelling that reveals the experience of life in this extraordinary place with astonishing vividness.

All forms of writing can lend something different to ethnographic endeavours; not just overtly 'creative' ones – and it is also important to remember the extent to which the act of reading adds new layers of meaning to a text. The genre labelling of a narrative, when it is published, as 'ethnography', 'memoir', 'non-fiction', 'fiction' or even 'ethnografiction', can function as a useful guide to how the author or publisher, conceived of the narrative when it was released into the world – but it is limiting to see such labels as determinative. The labelling of any narrative can productively evolve with the interpretive communities that go on to read it, as it becomes interlinked with other narratives, new and old. They all form part of the vast, intricate web of publishing that spans, connects and exceeds literary and academic spheres, whether these connections are acknowledged or not.

The characterization of my novel as a piece of ethnographic writing by the Victor Turner Prize committee means a lot to me. I feel that its recognition as such is valid, even though I did not compose it with this explicit intention, primarily because I approached it with what I now understand to be a fundamentally ethnographic motivation, as I have explained here – but also because of the way in which it is now being read.

Whatever others think of the most appropriate label for *The Invisible Crowd*, I hope that its retrospective characterization as ethnografiction – joining it to a rich seam of creative ethnographic writing by scholar-authors, ranging from Zora Neale Hurston (2018) to Ruth Behar (2017) – will help in a small way to legitimate and fuel more creative forms and modes of writing within anthropology and between academic disciplines.⁶

So, although I came to write my own work of ethnografiction accidentally, I would like to advocate for the benefits of doing so consciously, or semi-consciously – and, in general, for the value of the creative-critical interdisciplinary mash-up, both within anthropology and beyond. I look forward to reading more and more anthropologically-oriented writing that feels alive and experiential, that is moving and engaging for diverse audiences extending beyond the academy, and that explores the relationships between anthropology and literature, experience and culture, emotion and language, narrative and reality, fact and truth, art and life.

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Notes

¹ He dislikes the term 'hiker', preferring 'walker' – but he applies the term 'walking' to spending weeks traversing the Atlas mountains, for example.

² See the list of quoted headlines appended to *The Invisible Crowd*. I note that the period I am referring to here was largely before the so-called 'refugee crisis' began after the war in Syria, and before the photo of Aylan Kurdi prompted a slight softening of language in the media; and also before Brexit fever re-oriented immigrant hostility more strongly towards Eastern Europeans.

³ Nadifa Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* (2010) still stands as a rare example of a novel that engages with Eritrea, though it was set decades earlier, before the civil war, being based on her Somali father's life; it tells the story of how he passed through a colonised Eritrea as part of his journey north.

⁴ There are many texts on the relationship between anthropology and literature, but the classic is Clifford Geertz's *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988). For contemporary anthologies of writing on this theme, see Pandian and Maclean (2017) and Wulff (2016).

⁵ See Helen Sword (2017) for a convincing case and set of strategies for avoiding academese.

⁶ See Rosaldo, Narayan, and Lavie's *Creativity/Anthropology* (1993), which includes a discussion of Turner's influence in the introduction.