

G: All right, hello, and welcome to episode 2 of the Writing Across Cottey project. If you're not familiar with this project, this is a new project that the Cottey College Writing Center launched last semester, Spring 2020, to talk to faculty from across the disciplines about their attitudes toward writing, their experiences with writing, and what kind of writing is done in their disciplines, and why writing matters to that discipline. So if you haven't already, definitely check out our first episode, our interview with Dr. Oindrila Roy in International Relations. She had some great insight into how writing intersects with that discipline. And I'm very happy to be joined today by Dr. Sarah Quick, associate professor of Anthropology. And we're going to be talking to Dr. Quick about her attitudes toward writing and why writing matters to the world of anthropology. So thank you, Dr. Quick, for joining us for episode 2 here. And I'd like to start with just kind of a general, broad question that you can take in whatever direction you see fit, and that is what kind of writing is done in your discipline?

Q: Yeah, there's a lot of different—you could say genres—and levels of formality for writing in anthropology. So, I'm a cultural anthropologist, so each subfield kind of has its own genres. So, there's the archaeology, bioanthropology, and cultural anthropology—probably the biggest subfield is cultural anthropology—and linguistic anthropology. So, each one of those subfields has sort of specific journals that in a way are tailored to the subfield and might be slightly different in their conventions. And then I would say archaeology and bioanthropology—and these are just generalizations—but archaeology and bioanthropology are a little more science-y in their conventions, in their publications, not all of them by far, but that is conveyed in their journals and the sort of styles in those journals. There is one kind of—there are more than one, but one very well-known publication is American Anthropologist, and any of those subfields can appear in that journal.

G: Now when you say “science-y,” what exactly do you mean by that?

Q: Well you might—you would have a sort of set up with—there would be an abstract, which is pretty common across all the journals, but there would be a methods section, there would be a—there might be experiments done in bioanthropology, which isn't so common in the other subfields, and so you have to report on your results. So, it's all very set up sort of like with the scientific method in mind, which I know appears in other journals as well beyond bioanthropology, but it's more likely to be kind of the norm in that subfield. And there's just a little bit different tone in the writing I would say also sometimes, so the use of first person is pretty prominent in I would say cultural anthropology, not so much in—definitely in bioanthropology. And again, it kind of depends on the particular journal and topic, but—

G: Right.

Q: Yeah. But there is a more science-y feel to those subfields in their approaches as well as their writing.

G: Slightly different conventions. Interesting.

Q: M-hmm.

G: So why do you think it's important to be able to write well in your discipline?

Q: Well, in part because we are all about learning about humanity (laughs). And therefore to communicate what we have learned, you have to write. I mean, yes, you can communicate with other forums, but even those forums require elements of text or writing. So, like, we do have some video documentaries, ethnographic documentaries that are—you know, it's a different format than just full-fledged text. But you still have to script it, you still have to—you know, there's writing involved with

those formats as well. So, writing is a pretty significant part of trying to explain knowledge about humanity. And so anthropology—you probably know this, but others may not—it's basically the study of humans. That's what it is. And then it's just broken down into these sort of different ways of studying humans and different both methods but also sort of the perspective is more on the past for archaeology, bioanthropology more humans and biological beings, and cultural anthropology is more cultural side of things and broken down often into different cultures and societies, and then linguistic anthropology: language is a major lens for that. So, all of those are very important aspects of humans, and to be able to, like, get to your theories about and the results about the group—the specific issue you're studying or the groups you're studying, you have to write, communicate that. So, writing is pretty prominent in our field from day one.

G: Yeah. What specific writing skills would you say are most important for writing in your discipline?

Q: I would say for cultural anthropology—since that's my major—the, being able to just describe what is happening in the moment—we call these field notes. That's sort of our—like the data—one of the ways we collect our data is through field notes. So, being able to be very descriptive in your field notes to then be able to use those later in your analysis—that's pretty significant....

Q—so thinking about multiple things while you're just “documenting.” So, not just documenting one angle of things. So, it's a skill that, in writing, is a tool within that larger skill set, if that makes sense. You're not thinking of it as writing, you're thinking of it as “I'm documenting what's happening at the moment.” And—

G: So, we'll have to be very descriptive.

Q: Right, right.

G: Like trying to appeal to all the senses.

Q: Right.

G: Not just what you're seeing, but what you're hearing.

Q: Right, and I mean those can be tailored also depending on what you're studying in particular. So field notes, you know there is this tension sometimes in especially in cultural anthropology you know: is your research question, you know, focusing too narrowly on that and so you're sensing only what you want to sense, so to speak; or are you looking at everything so much that you kind of lose sight of even having a research question? So that's a tension that we have dealt with and, you know, there's not really one answer to it. But yeah, just being very aware of what's happening and being able to describe it fully is a major skill. But maybe things that you're more likely being aware of, your own sensory biases; so maybe you're very attuned to visual things and not too oral or auditory things. You know like being aware of your sensory channels, I guess, and maybe correcting that, depending on what you're studying.

G: Yeah! What has been the most important thing that you've learned about writing in your discipline?

Q: I think one thing that we, as a discipline, have struggled with and are still thinking about is the impact your writing has on who you're studying or humanity, more generally. So, you're writing about people, right? So in cultural anthropology, again that's my frame of reference, you are writing about contemporary people, usually, not always, sometimes it's a little more historical, but people that you know could read your writing; how are they going to feel about it? It's not like you're, you know, a

distant observer. At one time, that was more the case and that was an assumption in anthropology that, you know, you're gonna observe write this and other people are gonna read it, not the people that you're studying. And so, you weren't necessarily thinking about that and how you were representing the group that you were writing about and not necessarily thinking about the impact that you might have and how your representations of this group would then potentially do harm in some way. So, I think that's something. I mean, of course, everybody's sort of aware of that, but it's something that we've really thought about a lot in anthropology and we still kind of like reflect on it and so thinking about, you know, your impact and then how you would share your writing; how is that going to work, if what you're studying, the people who you're working with and are studying, if they're not in agreement with it or, you know, those kinds of things. Or just other people reading them. What are they gonna think and are they gonna just, you know, continue to stereotype these people who you are studying are already stereotyped in other forms of writing or other media. So, those are things that I think anthropology has really taught me to think about more than maybe anything else.

G: So, there's a lot of ethical considerations that go into writing in anthropology, it sounds like.

Q: Yeah, there really is. [Laughs] Yeah, it's kind of something that we periodically revisit. I mean, there have been periods when it's been a, you know, stronger emphasis and then we kind of leave it and then come back to it with another layer.

G: Interesting. What advice would you have for a student looking to improve her writing in anthropology?

Q: I think what I said before with, sort of, the being very disruptive and aware and trying to reflect that in your writing. That is something that I try to get students to think about and kind of, also, to think about your own biases in that awareness. So what you tend to be more likely to note or think about, you know, when you are making observations; becoming more and more aware of your own biases, so that you might be missing these other things that are also happening or you're just not describing them, even though they're happening because you tend to look at these other things; you fixate on something else. So, being, sort of very open to thinking about new ways of describing things and then also being aware of your own biases. That's one thing.

G: I want to go back briefly to something that you mentioned earlier. You know, in talking about bias and kind of checking your own bias. This reminds me a lot of other genres of writing, such as, like, a summary. If you were to write a summary, you know, we say, you know, it's a convention of the summary genre to, more or less, keep yourself out of it and don't let your bias towards the subject matter, or the text that you're summarizing, get in the way of your summary. And I'm curious. You know, you mentioned earlier that some realms of anthropology are a little bit more receptive to that first person kind of language—I, me, my—than others and I'm curious to what extent is that sort of author engagement appropriate in cultural anthropology and at what point does it, maybe, cross the line into bias or something that's more problematic?

Q: Yeah, it is, and I think there is a balance. Like, if things are so much from your point of view then you're not really describing what you're describing with a wider societal, or cultural, perspective, then that would be seen as problematic. But I wouldn't say there's necessarily one answer to that question, and there are sort of different grades of... And there is what's called autoethnography, which you may have heard of, and you're purposely – it's sort of similar to phenomena logical approaches where you're... but through you. So, you're really thinking of your experiences in this moment as others are reacting to you, and in that case, you know, first person is kind of a given. But if you're not doing

autoethnography, and that's not you know, set up as your major method for whatever piece you're writing in, then, if you are kind of sounding like you're doing autoethnography that would be considered a little too much. So there is a balance there, too, with the first person. But I think before, before we got all - what we think of as a reflex in term of anthropology – before we got all reflexive about our writing, we didn't often use the first person. And, in part, there was a bias there, but it wasn't so obvious and by using the first person in a way we're making our bias more obvious, if that makes sense. So that was kind of the shift. And I wouldn't say all anthropologists are all there with that shift, but that - you will see first person in culture anthropology articles. It won't be throughout the entire piece if it's not autoethnography, but that has been the shift, definitely.

G: Interesting. It sounds like just with any other discipline, the writing is contextual, right? It depends, you know, you ask the question, is it okay for me to use the first person? The answer to that question is it depends, what are you writing, what genre – specific genre are you engaging with, which component of anthropology are you engaging with, which journal are you trying to get published in – all of these contextual factors are going to play a role in whether you want to do that at all and then to what extent you want to do that sort of thing.

Q: Exactly. And I didn't really mention this, because I focused in on journals as our major genre. I mean, there are ethnographies that are books, and there might be like a chapter where it's much more first person, you know, you're telling why you got involved with this topic, and then the rest of the book hardly has your first person, you know. So it can bury even within the body of writing, and you know you can have editorials in the other disciplines that it's very much first person within these journals that generally don't do that in other – you know, it kind of depends on either the sub-genre situation, too. And you know, we have other people writing in more accessible, open to other folks beyond anthropology, and not just scholarly basis that are, I would say, all anthropologists might be more likely to use the first person as a sort of way to sound more accessible, in those more general, public-type “popular anthropology” we could call it, than use – although, again, it's not running throughout the article, perse. It might just be “I heard this” and “So and so”, you know, and kind of giving your, like a way to engage your audience more personally. But then it's not necessarily all that for the entire piece.

G: Right. Well, Dr. Quick, thank you very much for taking the time to meet with me and I learned a lot about how writing intersects with the world of anthropology, specifically cultural anthropology. And hopefully you all watching this agree that you learned a lot about that. This episode will be up on the Cottey College Writing Center website shortly, along with a transcript, and look forward to a third episode with another faculty member very soon. Until then, remember that the writing center is here to help you with any writing project that you might be working on regardless of what class it's for. It can even be for anthropology. We're open Monday through Friday 6-9 and we'd be happy to meet with you and help you with your writing. So, until then, I hope you stay safe and happy writing!

Q: Thank you for the opportunity to speak a little more on these topics.

G: Absolutely. Take care.