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Anthropological Fiction

Why Anthropologists Should Dare to Weave Speculation Through Academic Narratives

Roanne van Voorst
University of Amsterdam

When people ask me what I do for a living, I always falter for a moment before I am able to answer. After all, even *I* think my own answer must sound confusing. I am an anthropologist, futurist, and writer, and not necessarily in that order. In fact, I practise all three professional skills about equally, often simultaneously. So here comes the quick answer I have formulated over the years: [*breathes in*] I am a Futures-Anthropologist who researches ongoing transformations with significant social implications, such as climate change, or conflict, or the digitisation of healthcare, and I write about that in academic styles as well as in fiction, including novels, plays and short stories. [*breathes out*].

More specifically, and most relevant for this article, over the course of my career I have come to use what I call 'Anthropological Fiction'. This approach involves creating fictional narratives set within familiar structures and materialities, grounded in extensive anthropological research. In this article, I argue that Anthropological Fiction presents a potential solution for anthropologists – myself included – who face challenges in effectively conveying the richness of insights gained from fieldwork within the constraints of limited written formats. How can we accurately portray the complexities of the lives we have studied within the confines of strict word limits? This concern extends beyond philosophical considerations, as highlighted by Marisol de la Cadena (2015), who advocates for descriptions that bridge the understanding between ethnographers and their interlocutors who inhabit distinct yet interconnected worlds. This article argues that the *style* of representation is equally crucial and may necessitate exploration beyond traditional academic formats to avoid the risk of a text becoming a projection detached from the field.

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Recently, several scholars have suggested incorporating speculative or science fiction elements into anthropological writing, but this article proposes an alternative approach. Although these genres offer possibilities for envisioning alternative futures, they often take place in radically different material realities. In contrast, Anthropological Fiction seeks to present hypothetical yet plausible alternative futures within the current material context of the world. This approach can be viewed as a form of speculative practice, an exercise that stretches the scholarly imagination. I will argue that this practice is not only relevant to studies focused on the future, but to all anthropological work. At the same time, Anthropological Fiction stays faithful to the lived experiences and future aspirations of our research participants. This aspect enables readers to participate in visualising and potentially realising these envisioned futures.

By utilising two excerpts from my own work as illustrations, this article argues that employing anthropology as a speculative art, where fiction serves as a tool for promoting innovative thinking and compelling storytelling, offers a promising – but sometimes challenging – avenue for anthropologists to explore new forms of representation.

Anthropological Fiction versus other forms of ethnographic fiction

I use the term Anthropological Fiction to clearly indicate a form of writing that differs from other forms of fiction written by anthropologists that may be more literary in nature. I position this form of writing in between speculative science fiction and traditional anthropological writing as found in academic monographs or other forms of literary anthropology. There exists plenty of literary work of colleagues where a fictional form is given space within their academic texts, such as the poetry in Anna Tsing's books or the vignettes and even the photography in the book *How Forests Think* by Eduardo Kohn. While these texts are inspiring, they remain largely academic. The fiction is not allowed to exist for its own sake. Relatively short fictional fragments are framed within an academic discourse that seems to have to prove that the study was solid, taking the reader into a rational line of argument and abstract theory.

There are also anthropologists who now exclusively write fiction. Think of Amitav Gosh, Tahmina Anam and Camilla Gibb. Others, such as myself, do it in parallel, whereby they describe their studies both in academic form, and in a novel or memoir (cf. Martin 2023). But those novels, novellas, and short stories are not commonly counted as academic output in anthropological departments. At best, they are valued as an artistic by-product of 'real work': texts in the traditional, academic style published in academic journals, preferably with high impact factors. For novels and fictional stories, there are as of yet no HI indexes. This seems a somewhat bland comment, but – as I will argue below through a personal reflection – it is relevant to an anthropologist's career, and thus to the representational choices we make at the end of our fieldwork.

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Why fiction matters for anthropologists

There are three main reasons for why I believe fiction, in general, has much (more) to offer to our discipline. Firstly, I believe it is important for non-academics to access our anthropological insights, and approachable fictional works offer a way to do so for a wide audience. Secondly, fiction enables the author to honestly convey their impressions from the field, while emphasising that it reflects their interpretation of reality, not that of others per se. The perspective that anthropologists play a double role of literary and interpretative artists is supported by anthropologists like Margaret Mead, Edward Sapir, Ruth Benedict (Clifford 1986: 1 in Davison-Vecchione and Seeger 2023: 137), Geertz (1988, 2017) and, more recently, Ulf Hannerz (2015) and Matthew Wolf-Meyer (2019). However, in academic articles it is often made less clear that 'ethnography is a form of writing that does not only *describe* but also *constructs* its subject' (Davison-Vecchione and Seeger 2023: 137, italics in original). This is not necessarily because the author is unaware of the interpretive element of their research, which is inherent to the profession of anthropology, but because anthropologists are trained to build convincing arguments. They do so by engaging in two key writing strategies. One is to enhance 'empirical rigour' by meticulously recording sensory details, honouring the essence of real-life encounters (Pandian 2019: 33). Another is to refine their argument for clarity and persuasiveness. This process does not involve deceit. Given the intricate nature of fieldwork experiences, conveying every nuanced impression in an 8,000-word article is unfeasible. As a result, researchers must selectively curate their narrative to guide readers through the complexities, inevitably omitting more than what remains in the final text. Choices have to be made, and a thread has to be found that takes the reader by the hand through the story.[1]

A third and more personal reason for my enthusiasm about Anthropological Fiction is due to my profession as a Futures Anthropologist. My work focuses on the near future, typically ten years from the present, a timeframe that is generally considered somewhat easier to describe and predict than the futures that feature in more typical futurist or science fiction works. It involves extensive research, expert discussions, observation, and fieldwork in places where emerging future scenarios are evident (for instance factories producing cultured meat or brothels with sex robots) and interviews with interlocutors that already live or work in these emerging spaces. However, any attempt to envision the future is essentially a form of fiction, as even the most probable scenarios can be disrupted by unforeseen events. That makes a fictional writing style a more natural choice for me than for many other anthropologists. However, in this article I want to argue that it does not really matter whether we study the future, the present, or the past. After all, our textual representations are all partly fictional, although we sometimes forget this ourselves in the heat of the writing process, or prefer not to make it so obvious to the outside world. Indeed, that empathetic, imaginative aspect of our discipline is perhaps one of the most important aspects of our field, and offers opportunities to experiment with different forms of writing.

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From speculative science fiction to Anthropological Fiction

Anthropology and literature share many similarities, as both anthropologists and novelists possess the ability to empathise with others, exploring the complex inner worlds of others - individuals and groups. Anthropologists are attracted to the field due to their familiarity with diverse perspectives and needs, fostering empathy and solidarity. Additionally, anthropology requires a vivid imagination. Pandian (2019: 6) describes ethnography, our primary method of practice and expression, as both deeply empirical and highly speculative – an endeavour to glimpse the contours of potential worlds within the seams of our own. He thus posits that anthropology shares affinities with genres such as fiction, memoir, and travelogue, owing to the pivotal role played by imagination in our discipline (ibid. 2023: 6). Michael Jackson (1978;1998) previously characterised anthropology as a curious blend of sorcery and science.

Fictional writing offers a promising way forward for anthropologists to represent diverse cultural life worlds beyond the constraints of the academic genre. However, personally I do not feel comfortable with the form of fiction that has been recently promoted to this aim, namely Speculative Science Fiction – a genre that envisions possible futures or alternate realities based on current scientific knowledge and imagination. Several scholars have argued that authors such as Ursula Le Guin write a type of work that can in essence be called anthropological (Davison-Vechhione and Seeger 2023; Varis et al. 2023). The authors correctly point out that her books are based on thorough research. They also rightly argue that the 'thick description' that Le Guin utilizes to help readers visualise unknown situations is reminiscent of anthropological writing. However, Le Guin's books take place in a world that is completely different from ours in material and structural conditions. While her speculations stem from very real and recognisable problems and inequalities, they often take place in sci-fi settings that do not look or resemble the one we live in. And while this definitely challenges the reader to imagine a radically different world, it can also make it hard for them to envision a feasible, alternative future in our own world.

How this works may vary from reader to reader, but for me, the works of Le Guin and other writers of Speculative Science Fiction actually have the opposite effect. That is, at times I get the idea that a more equal society can only exist in a fantasy world that cannot possibly emerge from the current world. Speculative science fiction gives one the impression that, for a truly better world, we would have to move to another planet, or be born as ambisexual Gethenians – the main characters from her book *Left Hand of Darkness*. I often have a similar reaction when reading dystopian science fiction, where the entire world as I know it has collapsed, and there seems to be no goodness left. I find these books often beautifully and skilfully written, but I do not identify with them.

As an anthropologist, I *do* want readers to be able to identify with the world I depict based on my anthropological research. In my view, this facilitates a better understanding of the behaviour of interlocutors – a crucial task for anthropologists to demonstrate how what initially appears unusual or challenging can become comprehensible when one gains deeper

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insights into an individual's living context. Granted, Anthropological Fiction – the literary genre advocated in this article as a more advantageous approach for our field – remains too constrained to mirror reality or our perceptions thereof. Indeed, no form of writing truly captures the complexity of human existence. However, it does provide a platform for a language that accurately reflects an anthropologist's diverse encounters. Anthropological Fiction has the capability to transmit a particular mood to readers and it can elucidate the significant pauses that punctuated conversations between interlocutors. In Anthropological Fiction, constructing a cogent academic argument takes a back seat and impressions and experiences can be presented as they are, even if they are contradictory or do not directly contribute to a theoretical discourse.

Moreover, a plausible narrative depicting a potential future within the familiar world is more likely to inspire action or reflection. Like myself, numerous Futures Anthropologists explore whether we can outline an alternative future that is realistically achievable, aiming for their endeavours to surpass academic discourse (Hannerz 2015; Pink and Salazar 2020; Willow 2023;), while also transcending into a pondering beyond a fantastical thought experiment detached from current reality. In this vein, anthropology evolves into a speculative art, with fiction serving as a pivotal element in this undertaking.

Anna Tsing (2005) suggests that the imaginative mindset of an anthropologist is particularly valuable in the present era. She reminds us that we inhabit a world of uncertain prospects and disrupted living conditions. As anthropologists, we must not lose sight of 'imagining the about-to-be-present' in ways that defy the shadow of inevitability associated with neoliberal globalisation (ibid.: 269). Instead, we should direct our attention to states of emergence and emergency, where hope and despair intertwine (ibid.: 269). Marilyn Strathern (2005: 51) notes that people's actions are continuously influenced by unrealised potential worlds. Consequently, our discipline has the capacity and obligation to produce studies that seriously consider these potential worlds, which may not exist yet but significantly shape everyday human behaviour (Nielsen 2011: 399).

Futures Anthropologists are, of course, not the only colleagues in our discipline with such aims. The field of Futures Anthropology can be situated in relation to four other recent areas of disciplinary interest: the Anthropology of Optimism, the Anthropology of the Good, Design Anthropology, and Activist or Applied Engagement (Robbins 2023: xv). These anthropological areas all have in common that they choose to believe in 'the human capacity to create positive change' (Willow in Robbins 2023: xiv); that they feel uncomfortable with standing by passively in a world characterised by multiple crises; that attention to positive possibilities is urgently needed to counter the socioecological catastrophe; and that anthropologists have a role to play (Willow 2023: 2). This belief is evident in the 'Revitalizing Anthropology' publications, introducing a new cohort of students to the idea of addressing issues beyond the discipline (Borofsky 2024). This movement encourages anthropologists to recognise and act upon the tangible impact of anthropology in bringing about positive change that enhances the lives of others in significant ways.

Anthropological Fiction, as promoted in this article, could help to convince readers that the dominant

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discourse on what the future will look like in this world does not necessarily have to be true, and that alternatives are possible.[2] Below, I provide two original examples of Anthropological Fiction to demonstrate how it differs from Speculative Science Fiction. I describe the potential benefits it may offer for authors, readers, and interlocutors, as well as the dilemmas that occur when writing fiction as an anthropologist.

Fragment 1: A school outing to the slaughterhouse

The first section was published in a book titled *Once Upon A Time We Ate Animals: The Future of Food*, published in 2022 by Harper Collins. This book is based on international anthropological research focusing on a growing group of ethical vegans. The research included observations and interviews with a range of individuals, such as former dairy farmers now producing plant-based foods, parents of vegan children, animal activists, chefs embracing plant-based cuisine, 'vegansexuals,' and food designers creating meat alternatives. The study examines their current lives and aspirations for a future where plant-based eating is the norm, and animal consumption is taboo in regions where it is obsolete as ample and cost-effective alternatives are accessible. This envisioned future includes reduced environmental impact and a shift away from industrial farming practices. To authentically capture these diverse perspectives, I used fiction to explore the possibilities of a more compassionate world within our modern society, in a manner more freely than academic rules dictated. In fictional writing, I could set out a complex exploration of the future that would do justice both to my informants' vision and also to my own, sometimes more doubtful or critical ideas about that vision. I felt I had an important role to take on as an anthropologist, exploring what a more animal-friendly world could possibly look like, within the realms of our capitalist, high-tech society. That mental exercise challenged me to consider how we might view our current actions from a future viewpoint if such a world were to exist temporarily. The excerpt I selected for this article comes from a short, fictional interlude in the book, entitled 'An Outing to the Slaughterhouse'. For context, before and after this fragment, the book examines shifts in societal norms and values, drawing parallels to historical moments of re-evaluating concepts of good, evil, suffering, and civilisation. By referencing literature on animal research regulations, witch-hunts, and slavery abolition, I do not equate the suffering of animals and humans but instead highlight the evolving nature of ethical perspectives throughout history. Ultimately, my goal is to prompt reflection on the changing nature of ethical beliefs and societal norms, recognising that these concepts are shaped by the context of their time and place.

> 'Is everybody ready, and are you all sure you want to come in?' the tour guide shouts. She is trying her best to talk over the excited chatter of the group of students in front of her. 'Good, let's get started. Here you can see the cages where the pigs were kept until they were slaughtered'. The group leader pushes a large metal door with both hands, which slowly opens. Behind it is a huge, rectangular room with a high ceiling. It's dark and chilly and smells damp,

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with a faint odour of what to Syme seems like disinfectant. This part of the slaughterhouse museum is lit up only by thin strips of light shining down from the high, small windows. A six-foot-wide path runs through the middle of the room, and on either side of it are hundreds of pens, consisting of metal bars and concrete partitions.

Slowly Syme and his classmates begin to shuffle along the path. Some of them talk to each other quietly, one of them is wearing an oxygen mask. Syme opens the door of one of the pens, goes inside, and looks at the iron grating. So this is where they were kept, waiting for what was to come. This was when they were somewhere between four and seven months old, or whenever animal-eaters had decided they had reached sufficient weight.

The guide claps her hands. 'Can you all come and stand around me for a second?' she says in a cheerful tone. 'So let me tell you about this place'. She is a tall woman in her forties, with long blond hair all the way down her back. Syme has to do his best not to keep staring at her. 'Hanging on the wall to your left you'll see a docking iron, which was used to cut the tails off the piglets without anaesthetic. This one is a slightly newer model, from 2017, and you can come a little closer to get a better look but please don't touch it, as it's one of the last examples of a docking device that has survived. Most of them were destroyed by activists after the Protein Revolution, or by former pig farmers who did not want to be reminded of their old profession'. A couple of Syme's classmates go over to the side of the room and crowd around the strange device. Syme can see it well enough from where he is.

Multiperspectival imaginations

Writing fiction based on my anthropological research provided several advantages. Firstly, the fictional form made it widely accessible, reaching a broader audience in many different countries (it was translated into multiple languages and even adapted into a stage play). It particularly reached non-academically trained readers who may not have otherwise come into contact with this anthropological research. Thus, the text contributed to a social discussion.

Secondly, a fictional text can offer more room for diverse perspectives than the average academic paper. This was not only important to me, but also satisfying for my interlocutors who had trusted me and welcomed me into their farms, kitchens, and animal welfare clinics. Many of them had shared with me their experiences of being characterised as naive dreamers by outsiders, but now they felt taken seriously. Crucially, this sentiment was also shared by critics, such as those who advocate for the natural or necessary consumption of animals by humans. Their viewpoints were also explicitly incorporated into the text. For example, personas in this future scenario protest against the introduction of meat taxes, as they fear losing their livelihoods or the cultural importance of traditional family meat dishes. The length and form of this text allowed for the inclusion of all these conflicting perspectives and stakeholders.

The result was that the book was not only embraced by animal activists and vegans, but also by livestock farmers who may not have seen a plant-based future as desirable, yet still recognised the criticism of upscaling and industrialisation that causes suffering for both animals and humans in their profession. Consequently,

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the text became a kind of platform for proponents and opponents to discuss what is possible and desirable. This is a third advantage of the fictional form: because the story is set in the future, it seemed less difficult for different sides to find common ground in the discussion. A portrayal of an alternative future serves as an indirect, less personal critique of current practices than a normative book or academic criticism on current animal treatment.

Fourthly, the fictional form inspired action. Readers expressed in personal messages and on public forums that the book helped them envision a vastly different future than they had previously considered. For some, it encouraged them to take steps towards an alternative future by choosing to consume less animal products. Others shared their concern that the described future scenario seemed so plausible that it made them worry about their grandchildren potentially growing up in a world where animal meat was consumed daily at home. This prompted them to question whether they should take action to prevent this. In both examples, readers viewed this future scenario as a realistic possibility, leading them to reflect on their own desires and behaviours.

Some readers also admitted that they had always found vegan activists annoying or judgemental, but that they were able to empathise better with their concerns and aspirations by reading the book. In this sense, this anthropological work achieved an important goal of our discipline: making previously incomprehensible behaviour more understandable. I believe this endeavour was successful because the story was set in a fictional future that was still conceivable, existing in a world similar to our own.

There were also dilemmas and drawbacks associated with the fictional form. An obvious disadvantage is that the fictional form currently does not carry the same academic recognition as an academic article or book. In this case, the book was not classified as an academic publication but rather as valorisation, which may not hold as much weight in promotion evaluations.

This is likely an important reason why Hannerz (2015) points out that there is still a hesitancy within our discipline to openly acknowledge our own work as imagination or fiction. He encourages us to partake in philosophical reflections regarding our efforts to understand the present, particularly concerning the gap between phenomenon and representation. Following his lead, I would like to propose that if reality itself cannot be fully captured, then depicting an unknown future may not be fundamentally different from our traditional endeavours to represent the present. I contend that the hesitation to view anthropological work as a form of fiction extends to anthropological studies focused on the present, texts that recount the past, and those that envision future scenarios. Fundamentally, these are all narratives that centre around possibilities and partial truths.

A second dilemma is that writing fiction also comes with its own 'rules' and limitations. In order to enhance readability for a broad audience and because I did not want the book to be overly lengthy, I made certain textual choices. For example, I allocated less space for theoretical reflections, even though they could have been relevant for our understanding of how people collectively imagine industrialised meat production, or why people often eat or consume in ways that misalign with their norms and values. I prioritised

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‘thick descriptions’ that would transport readers to a familiar but alternative world. In doing so, I missed the opportunity to contribute to theoretical debates, which I consider important for the discipline of anthropology.

Anthropologists could, of course, opt to work on parallel publications: one in a fictional form and one in a more traditional academic form. Personally, I found transitioning from fiction to a concise, academic format challenging. I felt that the diverse perspectives I encountered in my research would not be properly represented in a structured academic article, with its demand for coherent argumentation. Some editors suggested focusing on sociotechnical imaginaries, as described by Jasanoff and Kim (2015). While this is indeed an interesting and relevant perspective on the theme, one that I have engaged with in my other studies, it did not capture the multiperspectival nature of the field I aimed to convey to a broader audience.

In my Anthropological Fiction, I aim to capture the diverse perspectives of my interlocutors and imagine a future world envisioned by them. I wanted to write about a future that did not yet exist, may never exist, but is a possibility – at least in the eyes of my interlocutors. In the words of Anand Pandian (2019: 5), I wanted to take up the anthropological challenge to ‘trace the outlines of a possible world within the seams of this one’.

Fragment 2: Dutch soldiers in a (fictional) war in Syria

This challenge may become even more crucial when it concerns interlocutors exhibiting behaviour or holding future visions that most people, including the anthropologist describing it in a text, find difficult to understand or even disapprove of. This is the rationale behind my selection of this second fragment: an excerpt from my novel *Lief van Je* (*How Kind of You*), which I crafted based on anthropological research among interlocutors adhering to a xenophobic ideology, particularly focused on individuals with an Arab appearance. The individuals in question were Dutch and US soldiers who, after serving in a conflict-ridden country, return to their home nation with (often unrecognised) trauma. The novel portrays a similar narrative and is set during a future or imagined conflict in Syria. I have translated the excerpt for this article from Dutch to English. The inspiration for writing it stemmed from my discovery that veterans, upon returning home, sometimes develop an uncharacteristic fear towards refugees and others who physically resemble the individuals they learned to distrust during their deployment. This fear can, at times, manifest as racist or criminal behaviour. They often yearn for their time at war, where, under intense stress and in the company of their comrades, they felt more self-assured and less fearful than in the country they returned to after their service.

Anthropologist Joel Robbins raises several questions that speak to these insights. He asks, for example, ‘how ethnographers ought to approach the study of people who are committed to versions of the good that many anthropologists are inclined to think of as bad’ and

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'what are anthropologists to do when they are not optimistic about some of the things the people they study are optimistic about?' (Robbins 2023: xv). These questions were clearly relevant in this research project. My interlocutors envisioned a future in which they would no longer coexist with migrants in their neighbourhood or country. They believed they needed to defend themselves and their families against foreigners; they believed they should vote for political parties that would deport these newcomers; they believed it was necessary to behave in a racist and antisocial manner towards newcomers.

Anthropological Fiction can be helpful in such cases, for both the anthropologist and the reader, in better understanding the people with whom we disagree. I elaborate on this point below. The following segment expands on the mental stretching exercise that I mentioned earlier. Here, it is not only about thinking about a possible future, but also about explaining behaviour that most readers find frightening or reprehensible.

The novel tells of a young, female protagonist who has to serve as a soldier. The following excerpt recounts her first experiences in the training camp. In reality, her story is constructed from the stories of dozens of interlocutors, whose details and descriptions I have blended into one narrative.

> 'I was no longer a woman, not even human. I was part of a giant octopus with hundreds of arms and legs and throbbing guts and metres of pulsating blood. We trained, ate, and rested in a small room, hearing each other's phone calls home. There were no secrets. There were only training sessions and leave, sometimes. And in between, we slept. If I took a step, I would hear the thumping of dozens of soles of shoes on the earth. If I put on my bulletproof vest, I heard the clicking of dozens of buckles. No individual self existed anymore, the Rêve of old had disappeared, dissolved into the whole, like a decomposed body in the earth. I had been reborn as Private Chaulk and with an invisible umbilical cord I was attached to Frank and through him to Tom and Michael and Ronald and Dennis and Officer Roosevelt.
>
> Later, the social worker they had sent to me would ask if I had often been scared in Syria. I hadn't been, and I told her so, over and over again, even though I could see that she wasn't very interested in that answer – she always looked at the notes in her notepad for a long time as I talked, and then her eyes were sometimes completely dead. But what I was trying to tell her was true: during the war I had not been afraid. Well after, back home, I was startled by loud noises and strange faces on the street. But not, not for a single moment, was I scared during deployment. Not because I didn't realise what could happen. Precisely not. Never was death so close and obvious, survival seemed such a matter of luck. But to be scared you need energy. I didn't have that. None of us did. During the mission, everyone was constantly dead tired. From lugging heavy materials, from the short nights, the waiting and paying attention. From the invisible enemy who never did anything until he did. Rumbling in the distance, in slow waves, low and dull at first, then whistling, rising sand. I experienced the most dangerous moments in split seconds, when I felt no

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fear, just resistance to run because I was so tired and it was so hot and my rucksack so heavy. But my body didn't listen to those complaints: it started running. "That was close!" Magazine ejection, rear magazine check, slide in the rear position, chamber check, slide controlled return, trigger press to relax the weapon. "One confirmed kill, gentlemen!" sounded over the radio.

Loud cheering. Back into the bushmaster, to the base. The fatigue in my legs. The warmth of the evening air, the darkness. The smell of ground cumin seeds. The storm that announced itself by making the metal rings of the tent cloth clatter against the poles. A loose jute bag was blown into the air, then the grains of sand forced our eyes to slits. That, once I was back in Holland, I sometimes longed intensely for the war, I dared not tell the social worker. But that too was true. Not for the dust that turned every bit of uncovered skin on my body brown and dry, or the grains of sand that painfully stroked my forehead in strong winds. Not for the heat, the heavily packed backpacks and the body armour that was always damp from my own sweat. Not for the boredom in camp. And not for the field visits, where I had to walk out in front of an armoured car with a metal detector, every step risking a blast. What I missed was the moment the Syrian guards opened the gate to our base for us. We raised our hand to them in greeting, they nodded back. Black beards covered their protruding cheekbones, their eyes did not smile. Being dusty and hungry, being allowed to take off the shard vest, and remove the helmet. In the single high sleeper, calmness took possession of me. So intense and overwhelming it was, that sometimes I thought I never knew what contentment meant before. With the quiet breathing of Frank and the others in the background, I felt secure, part of a group, but that was not what made me feel downright happy in Syria so many times'.

From fiction to empathy

One benefit of the choice for Anthropological Fiction is the possibility for depth and detail, which can assist the reader in developing empathy for the personas in a text. The fictional form provides more space for textually exploring how something feels for an interlocutor. In this story, I was able to create understanding for the fact that many of my interlocutors exhibit xenophobic behaviour out of fear and trauma. I chose Anthropological Fiction because that form naturally encouraged me to write freely and explicitly about what might have been going on in the minds and hearts of my interlocutors.

Through my own imagination, which was inspired by, but also went beyond the specific information gathered from interviews with soldiers, I was able to understand why people sometimes descend into behaviours that I find repulsive but wanted to comprehend: racism, xenophobia, the use of offensive language, making threats, or even harming refugees. In this sense, this project exemplified typical anthropological work as an attempt to make tangible and comprehensible what appears incomprehensible to outsiders (including myself), and what typically elicits our disapproval. Due to the discomforting nature of this perspective, it was

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crucial to me that my writing practices remained true to the lived experiences of my interlocutors and their ways of conceptualising the world. In addition, the fictional form makes it easier to protect the privacy of informants, which can be especially important when they exhibit inappropriate behaviour as in this case. Some had engaged in racist actions towards refugees or individuals of Arab descent, or had fantasies about doing so. In some instances, they intentionally committed crimes or violated the law, only to be apprehended. 'And it has to be done quickly, otherwise I will soon kill someone from this apartment building', one soldier solemnly told me, as we sat at the kitchen table in the same apartment with his wife and blonde toddler twins. Moments earlier, he had displayed the gun he kept, purportedly to 'protect his children' from migrant neighbours. In his perception, this was a means to create a safer future.

Throughout the publication process, I grappled with the challenge of protecting the privacy of the individuals I worked with. In order to help readers understand the origins of the soldiers' xenophobia, I felt it was important to provide detailed accounts of their training and deployment. But these narratives risked making my informants easily identifiable to those familiar with their stories. While I could have carefully edited and adjusted details in an academic article, the novel format provided me with more flexibility to blend details in a way that disguised the identities of my informants, ensuring their security and comfort with the publication.

The third point corresponds to a benefit that was previously discussed in relation to the first excerpt. The novel reached a broad audience and sparked social conversations, particularly among veterans and their partners who found it impactful. Wives of male veterans shared how their partners had gifted them the book, which helped facilitate conversations about traumatic experiences without immediate pressure. The novel also served as a valuable resource within Dutch veterans' organisations, prompting discussions on supporting returning soldiers and addressing post-traumatic stress. The narrative concluded with a national photo exhibition involving veterans and refugees, promoting dialogues on safety and insecurity. Public lectures further engaged audiences and fostered understanding, potentially influencing policy improvements. As such, the work aligns with that of Activist or Applied Engagement Anthropologists, who feel uncomfortable with standing by passively watching a crisis unfold and who believe that anthropologists can, and should try to, make a difference (Willow 2023) – however small. This impact may have been harder to achieve through a less widely-read academic publication.

However, there were drawbacks to choosing fiction as the medium for my research. The daunting task of condensing these complex, multi-layered experiences into a relatively concise paper, while also making room for discussions on concepts, frameworks, and methodology, and representing the voices of my informants in a manner that would be appreciated by reviewers, left me devoid of the courage to begin writing academically. The resulting, fictional text did not meet the formal criteria for academic recognition, a common issue in neoliberal academia already discussed. What is notable here is that the academic evaluation mirrored my own beliefs about the defining characteristics of

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academic work. Towards the project's end, I questioned its academic potential and value, influenced by my perceptions of anthropologists and academic standards. I hope that these entrenched notions evolve in the future, encouraging critical examination and reassessment by myself and my colleagues.

Another drawback of prioritising fiction over a conventional representation was the realisation that the writing process distanced me from my academic responsibilities. Similar to the 'culture shock' experienced by anthropologists post-fieldwork, this deep, imaginative exercise created a culture shock within my academic work. Trying to understand and relate to my interlocutors while also addressing xenophobic and aggressive behaviour made it difficult to write a detached, academic article. Critiquing their behaviour during interviews and book presentations was not the issue – I had done this frequently during interviews or presentations surrounding the book publication. The issue was that at that moment, I no longer saw the purpose of an academic contribution in its traditional form: how would that assist in addressing this pressing societal issue? Additionally, I was aware that the vast majority of veterans in my study would not read an academic article, and if they did, I could hardly imagine them recognising themselves in the abstracted rendition of their stories. It struck me that such writing would disrupt our established *rapport*, essentially resulting in an academic discourse detached from their everyday lives. I was reminded of cautionary tales such as the one shared by Elizabeth Enslin (1994) who warns that even well-crafted academic writing may not be sufficient to bridge the gap of unequal privilege that often separates anthropologists from the communities they study. This did not sit well with me. If one of the essential roles of anthropology is to provide a platform for those whose voices are often unheard, what happens if they no longer recognise themselves on that platform?

In the years since completing this project, I have often questioned my decision to prioritise fiction over a more conventional approach. I realize that as anthropologists, we must balance emic and etic perspectives, and I may have delved too deeply into the field of fiction. Looking back, I see a missed opportunity to contribute significantly to academic discourse by exploring themes such as the meaning of safety, risk, and Tine Molendijk's concept of 'moral injury' (2021). I now regret not writing about this research in an academic capacity, as I have come to understand better the parallels between anthropological-academic work and Anthropological Fiction. If both forms combine ethnographic knowledge and imagination, as I argue in this article, it appears that my novel does an equal amount of (in)justice to the reality that I observed in the field, as would an academic article would have done. The novel just highlighted different parts and exposed different layers of that reality. Rather, writing fiction made me feel more confident in relation to my interlocutors because my imagination was explicitly expressed, and it better resembled their perspectives. In contrast, a conventional academic article could – unjustly or unintentionally – project an aura of objectivism, particularly for readers who are not trained in the interpretative discipline of anthropology (such as my interlocutors).

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Some concluding remarks

The possibilities and limitations of capturing life through words have long troubled anthropologists (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Hurston 1990[1937]). Since then, numerous anthropologists have advocated for and experimented with alternative forms of writing (Elliott and Culhane 2017; Pandian and McLean 2017). Building upon Fassin's ideas (2014), this article argued that what I refer to as Anthropological Fiction may offer deeper insights into life than traditional social scientific representations of reality.

Anthropological Fiction acknowledges the performative nature of language, viewing writing as a transformative practice that shapes realities rather than merely representing them. It is explicitly imaginative, yet firmly grounded in rigorous ethnography and history, and is thus easily conceivable for both the interlocutors in my studies and the readers of the work, while also allowing for more freedom and explicit speculation or imagination in the writing style.

This argument is largely consistent with the views of scholars such as Varis et al. (2023) and Davison-Vecchione and Seeger (2021), who advocate for the use of fictional writing as a promising avenue for anthropological representation. They argue that such writing serves as a mental exercise, prompting readers to imagine possible explanations for behaviours or concepts that may otherwise be challenging to comprehend, and to speculate on potential alternative futures. This 'art of speculation' is seen as a valuable skill for both anthropology and literature.

Contrary to these scholars, I do not believe that Speculative Science Fiction represents the ideal trajectory for anthropology. While this genre undoubtedly fosters imaginative thinking for both writers and readers, even when grounded in thorough anthropological research as seen in the works of Le Guin, the stark differences in material structures between speculative fiction and reality can hinder reader identification with the depicted world and the life worlds of the individuals within it.

As an alternative, this article advocates for Anthropological Fiction: writing rooted in anthropological research yet unrestricted by the conventional constraints of academic articles. This approach allows for a more relatable portrayal of particular life worlds, fostering greater empathy and facilitating reader engagement. Furthermore, such fiction has the potential to inspire proactive responses towards achievable, alternative futures. Currently, there is a tendency to avoid engaging in explicit fiction writing within the field of anthropology, often due to misguided reasons. In many instances, fieldnotes are meticulously crafted in a conventional academic style, aiming to present an objective 'truth'. However, as numerous anthropologists and other scholars have underscored, there is a pressing need for alternative forms of writing to capture the essence of ethnographic experiences. Anthropological Fiction emerges as a valuable tool in this regard.

In the two writing examples I have provided, I combined data from ethnographic research with my imagination. Accompanying these examples are reflections on the rationale behind my specific textual choices and an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses for myself, my interlocutors, and readers. One reflection was that I have personally struggled in treating these outputs with the same level of academic value as

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my more conventional scholarly works. This hesitance may stem from the fact that academically recognised publications serve as a crucial yardstick for evaluating anthropologists professionally. Furthermore, these publications are often deemed more objective in their presentation, thereby appearing more truthful.

Conversely, I am led to ponder whether there exists a more paramount concern in anthropology than the people we worked with. Given the substantial demands we place on our interlocutors in terms of answering inquiries, investing energy, and exhibiting openness, do we not bear the responsibility of prioritising the task of reciprocating their contributions by reflecting their voices authentically in our work?

I am uncertain whether I can provide definitive answers to these questions. After all, theoretical contributions constitute a significant aspect of our work, and we pursued careers as anthropologists rather than activists. And yet, I can confidently assert that I did not employ significantly more imagination in Anthropological Fiction than in the academic publications I presented as non-fiction. The distinction lies in the explicit nature of the imagination in the former compared to the latter.

I concur with Anand Pandian (2019), who highlights that as anthropologists, we engage in continual fantasising and interpretation, projecting our own perspectives onto the emotions, experiences, and intentions of our interlocutors. It is inherent in our discipline to envision alternative, potentially improved worlds for those we work with. The utilisation of imagination in this process is not a weakness but an integral component of our anthropological role. In the words of Pandian: 'The uniqueness of anthropology lies in its insistence on the openness of the human, an idea pursued in the discipline with greater consistency and tenacity than in any other field of enquiry' (ibid.: 13).

I hope that anthropologists, including myself, will increasingly embrace the possibilities for experimentation within their writing and discipline, giving due consideration to written imagination as a crucial tool for understanding the 'Other' and exploring alternative, perhaps even optimistic, futures.

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Notes

1 I sometimes think that the well-known critiques of Clifford Geertz's work, particularly the criticism that his central focus on the 'cultural text' – exemplified in his work by the Balinese cockfight – was blind to the material realities in his field, notably the inequalities that existed among his interlocutors and that undoubtedly influenced his interpretation and experience of the fights (Howe 1991; Duneier 2011: 7-8; Sewell 1997: 37), may partly be attributed to the eternal problem of representation. How does one fit a truly holistic, heterogeneous yet somewhat coherent narrative into a book, let alone an article, especially when adhering to the writing style Geertz promoted: thick description? Rather than being completely unaware of hierarchical differences in the society he studied, it seems to me that Geertz prioritised developing a different argument: he made choices in his writing.

2 Vice versa, readers who identify with the depicted world may be persuaded that deterioration is possible and feel inspired to take action to avoid that scenario. For example, in his books *The Circle* and *The Every*, Dave Eggers paints a highly conceivable world in which social media companies exert even more control than they already do. He skilfully achieves this: his work is recognisable and chilling, serving as a model for many to become more aware of what they do not want in their future. Although I am not familiar with Eggers' methodology, given the detailed way in which he describes the organisational culture of the technology company in his book (which strongly resembles Meta), my suspicion is that he based the story on thorough literature research and interviews with Meta employees. Therefore, his approach already seems quite akin to what I would call Anthropological Fiction, although an important prerequisite for this would be that the text is grounded in in-depth anthropological research.

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