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Kalir, B.

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## Writing as Cognition

[December 7, 2015](#) [Carole McGranahan](#)

*[Savage Minds is pleased to publish this essay by guest author [Barak Kalir](#) as part of our [Writers' Workshop series](#). Barak is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. He is the author of [Latino Migrants in the Jewish State: Undocumented Lives in Israel](#) (Indiana University Press, 2010), and co-editor with Malini Sur of [Transnational Flows and Permissive Policies: Ethnographies of Human Mobilities in Asia](#) (University of Chicago Press, 2013). Currently he is working on an ERC funded research project on [The Social Life of State Deportation Refugees](#).]*

I will only know what I precisely want to say in this piece once I finish writing it.

This enigmatic sentence is not meant as an alluring opening statement, nor is it a sign for an experimental literary method that I will be employing in this blog. For what it's worth, this sentence captures my principal insight into the process of writing. It is an insight that I gained after years of experiencing much frustration with writing, after producing endless drafts of the same text, after nights and days spent on trying 'to get it right', after struggling not to lose my focus, not to get lost in the texts I tried so hard to write.

Luckily, I do not feel like that any more. But it has been a long ride.

Initially, facing my frustration with writing – when I was struggling with chapters in my doctoral dissertation, or with my first attempt at publishing an article in a peer-review journal – I was inclined, and even determined, to attribute my pains to the fact that the ideas in my head were not sharp enough at the point of writing. I repeatedly told myself as a beaten mantra: 'You need to be very clear about what you want to say, **before** you sit down and start writing'. I felt angrily vindicated after every article or book that I read, thinking it was so obvious that the authors knew exactly what they wanted to argue and illustrate.

I started to draw my arguments on a blank sheet in preparation for writing. I made tentative tables of content before I had written even one chapter. I sketched road maps for the order of sections in an article, I decided on the data to be included, and on the theories to be used. Notwithstanding my best efforts at having clarity in my head and being well prepared for the writing phase, it always ended up pretty much the same. Once the words began to accumulate on the

screen in front of me, the text seemed to take on its own direction, leaving me halfway, confused about my main argument, about the debates in which I intervene, about the subtleties I try to get across. Why can I not control my text? Why does it take on a different form from the one I had in mind? After all the preparation I invested in having a clear focus, why can I not stick to it?

Sharing my writing frustrations with peers at the department and in meetings with colleagues at conferences, I quickly discovered that my predicament was nothing special. It seemed everyone was suffering from the excruciating process of writing. I must admit it made me feel better. It was a relief to realize that it wasn't only my shortcomings as a writer that turned this endeavor into a permanent struggle. There appeared to be something about the essence of writing that challenged anyone who attempted it.

My breakthrough came one day while talking with the late Gerd Baumann, a wonderful anthropologist and a gifted writer. For many years, Gerd Baumann taught me various 'tricks of the trade' for good writing. Helpful as these tricks were, they never really succeeded to elevate, not even to decently mitigate, my writing struggles. One day, complaining to him for the nth time about my latest struggle with an unyielding text, Gerd grinned at me and emitted a rhetorical question that would change my idea about writing forever: 'When will you realize that writing is a second cognitive process?'

I'm sure that for many people this sentence is an obvious one; perhaps even banal or cliché. For me, however, it served as a crucial eye opener. Not because I could never before think or feel that this was the case about writing, but because there are things that you need to hear from someone in order for their full meaning to dawn on you.

Writing is not about putting in words the mental ideas you have in your head. Writing is a process in which you digest, make sense and form your mental ideas, in ways that are inevitably different from toying with ideas in your head, or talking them over with colleagues, or presenting them in a conference. There is something about the externalization of ideas in a textual form that activates and brings with it a particular cognitive process. This is why writing is by definition a puzzling and creative process. It is not about transforming thoughts into words; it is about transforming thoughts. Period.

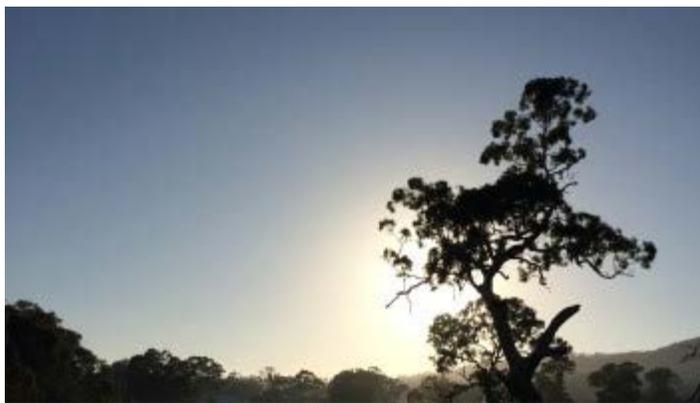
It is after we have written about something that we should do our best to make sure that the text we produce captures the thoughts that evolved out of the very writing process.

I hope I managed that much in this short piece. If not, I will give it another writing. And then produce some more text. Some text that brings to light thoughts I didn't know I had.

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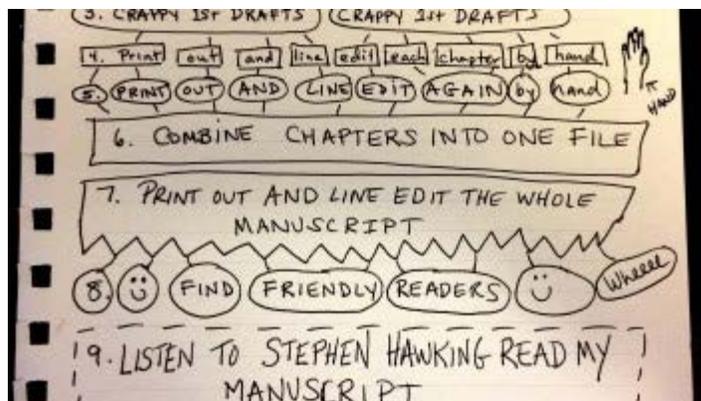
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I am an anthropologist and historian of Tibet, and a professor at the University of Colorado. I conduct research, write, lecture, and teach. At any given time, I am probably working on one of the following projects: Tibet, British empire, and the Pangdatsang family; the CIA as an ethnographic subject; contemporary US empire; the ongoing self-immolations in Tibet; the Chushi Gangdrug resistance army; refugee citizenship in the Tibetan diaspora (Canada, India, Nepal, USA); and, anthropology as theoretical storytelling.

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## 8 thoughts on “Writing as Cognition”



1. [John McCreery](#) says:  
[December 7, 2015 at 8:21 pm](#)

Yes, oh, yes, indeed. For more on this topic see *Writing to Learn* the classic book by former *New Yorker* editor William Zinsser: <http://www.amazon.com/Writing-To-Learn-William-Zinsser/dp/0062720406>

2.  [Caitlin Ryan](#) says:  
[December 7, 2015 at 11:18 pm](#)

Carol, I loved reading this piece, thank you! Reminds me of an essay by George Orwell, “On Politics and the English Language,” that has always stuck with me. He makes a related argument about the relationship between bad writing and the poverty of creative thinking in academia and politics:  
<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/orwell46.htm>

3.  [Carole McGranahan](#) says:  
[December 7, 2015 at 11:56 pm](#)

Thanks for the comments. Want to be sure everyone knows that Barak Kalir is the author of this essay. I am the series editor, but not the author. But yes, yes to the Orwell piece!

4.  [Jovan Maud](#) says:  
[December 8, 2015 at 10:38 am](#)

Thank you Barak for that lovely take on the mysterious process of writing. I will use your opening sentence as my new mantra.

5.  [johnmccreery](#) says:  
[December 8, 2015 at 6:34 pm](#)

That first sentence is, indeed, a lovely one. A point to ponder may be how much readers should be exposed to the process by which conclusions are reached. In the classic academic/ scientific mode we present our results in an

authoritative voice, concealing the muddle that gave birth to them. In a more self-reflective mode, we may lead the reader down all the twisting trails we followed, even to dead ends. I wonder what others here think about the pros and cons of these or other approaches.

6.  **B. Van Aken** says:  
[December 8, 2015 at 11:57 pm](#)

Forgive me for hijacking your provocative post, Barak, but I was so moved to learn that Gerd Baumann passed away much too soon, that I felt him poking me to comment here. I was but a blip in the course of his life, just background noise rather than a beloved Chopin composition, but he left a deep and lasting impression on me. Almost 24 years ago, if I remember correctly, he taught me my first cultural anthropology course, and although I can't say I feel he taught me much about writing, he taught me, as you suggest, something critically related: how to think like an anthropologist.

I can still see him standing against the blackboard dissecting E.B. Tylor's definition of culture like a piano teacher drilling novices; he made us recite it over and over and over again, interjecting his own ethnographic experiences to give flesh to its bones, until we memorized it and could repeat it to him on our own.

He then assigned us our first writing assignment: to choose some contemporary social policy problem and analyze it from an anthropological perspective, or in terms of Tylor's culture as a complex whole definition. Just as anthropology was pluralizing and splitting, he insisted we still must understand any social issue from Tylor's perspective. I surprised myself analyzing foreign aid to address hunger and learning about how key donors conceive time and space, as if I suddenly found myself in a calculus or physics class. That rationally calculated policies may fail precisely because their calculators are incapable of accurately perceiving the multivalent relations between relevant parts to a complex whole became visible, something I carried with me in all my future work. He demanded we dig into our unconscious complexes, analyze them, and then compose aesthetically, in the sense of expressing – or playing out – the momentarily necessary.

Yet, as I alluded, he demanded those basics first: one must know one's instrument to play it, just as one must understand what one is playing to compose. I suspect he'd be rather disappointed that while I learned to think like an anthropologist, I failed to play like one in the academy, and fell out of the profession. He subtly tried to teach us that lesson too, by one day taking us on a field trip to where the anthropology department was housed, giving us a brief tour.

Lastly, he taught me something of great personal importance, which perhaps I should not share, but will anyway despite my better judgment: how to control my temper, for I am ashamed to say, I can often quickly, and much too rashly, lose mine. Whenever I do, I see him vividly in my mind the day he was close to losing his in our classroom, for a reason I completely forget. After calmly announcing he was going to do so, he stood there as still as a tree, closed his eyes, inhaled deeply, and counted very, very slowly to ten, exhaling with each count. On my better days, in such situations, I do the same.

7.  **Barak** says:  
[December 11, 2015 at 3:33 am](#)

Thanks so much for the nice comments everyone, and especially to B. van Aken for sharing his memories of the wonderful Gerd Baumann, and for reminding us the creative relation between musicality and anthropological teaching and writing.

8.  **Carole McGranahan** says:  
[December 14, 2015 at 9:41 am](#)

Hello,

Thanks for reading and commenting on this post. However, our comments policy (<http://savageminds.org/comments-policy/>) requires comments to be 500 words or less. Could you please edit this comment so that it meets the policy?

Many thanks, Carole

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