This morning, as I am sitting down to write this blog entry in my rental apartment in Nogales, I peer through the window: the sun has illuminated the dark-brown border wall that coils over the hilly landscape and reminds me of the spiked back of what happened. Writing from photographs changes the way we convert experiences and events into prose, suggests Casey N. Cep. They serve as powerful tools to enhance memories about the encounter that begin to twist immediately after it is over.

connects Tucson with Nogales, and whenever pulling out my phone to quickly enter some text seems more polite—and less intrusive—than opening my notebook. When I am driving and I can't pull over to jot down a thought that I want to keep, I record voice memos; I have done so passing through Border Patrol checkpoints on Arivaca Road and on sent off to my editor on the eve of spring. But during fieldwork, keeping a regular writing routine has been difficult. The topic of our research inevitably shapes how, where, and what we write, and my study of fire and rescue services under heightened Lithuanian police scrutiny has been problematic. Preliminary findings can be inconclusive or contradictory. What if, once you are back at your desk, going through your field notes with analytical focus, you regret what you said or wrote while your experiences were still as fresh as wet leaves?

The significance of the research project to the broader public. With that in mind, I wrote an op-ed for the Guardian that was a critical commentary on existing federal policies that blend emergency health care with immigration policing: the riskiest form of public writing I have done. It was shared instantaneously via social networks and had more readers than any of my scholarly publications ever will. It was shared instantaneously via email, blogging, or social media. These places and begin to form a story. I may not have a well-structured writing routine, but this haphazard creation of field work has been surprisingly productive. Fieldwork also precipitates other genres of writing, such as writing for the public. There are field assistants, and numerous photographs. The website is also linked to the project's Twitter account (@borderEMS) and displays a feed of the most recent events linked to my work. At the request of my contacts in the fire service and emergency management, who invite me to participate in their trainings and meetings, on a couple of occasions I wrote brief news pieces and sent photographs to the local newspaper in Nogales, Arizona. I have also given interviews to several Mexican news outlets, those...
One of my favorite Saturday Night Live skits from the mid-1990s is a game-show parody called “What’s the Best Way?” The premise is simple: a group of New Englanders jockey to give fast, accurate driving directions. Phil Hartman plays an old man with an airy Downeast Maine drawl, Adam Sandler plays an electrical contractor from Boston, and Glenn Close plays an upper-class Connecticut resident. The host, played by Kevin Nealon, asks questions about how to get from one place to another within New England. For example, “Who’s got directions from Quincy, Mass to the Jahdan Mahsh department store in Bedford, New Hampshire?” Contestants buzz in, quiz-show style, with their directions, directions that are loaded with quirky geographical references, including a “wicked huge Radio Shack” and a fahm that offers a chance to pick fresh Maine blueberries (“but only in the summah”).

I love this skit because it satirizes my own predilection as a native New Englander for giving overly detailed directions that orient the asker to the contours of the road, the colors and shapes of houses, and places that “youstah be there” (instead of supposedly conventional things such as the number of traffic lights or street names).

But I also find this rather esoteric parody instructive for thinking about how to write place ethnographically. For many anthropologists, navigating field sites that are out-of-the-way or otherwise marginalized, Phil Hartman’s
character’s resigned answer to one directional challenge might ring a little true: *yah caahn’t get theyah from heeyah*. Beyond writing about place, how can we use our writing to recall visual, material memories of getting from one place to another (or failing to do so)?

Doing fieldwork involves moving through and experiencing space in ways particular to our projects and the places we work. In my research on Darjeeling tea plantations, I climbed up and down steep Himalayan foothills, pulling myself through the tightly planted, gnarled tea bushes that gripped the slopes. But a trip down to the plantations each morning first required a consideration of the eating schedules of the families of macaque monkeys, who would descend from the temple, where they spent their evenings, to the road below to munch on offerings left by morning walkers and whatever else they could mug off of passersby. If I could not find an old Tibetan woman on her circumambulation of the temple complex to cling to for protection as we weaved through the gauntlet of hungry monkeys, I made elaborate detours. When I write, I recall these everyday movements. As ethnographic writers, these remembered images and descriptions from our field notes are “data,” as important as material from interviews or other punctuated events.

Why should we care about how (or whether) one can “get there from here”? Perhaps because, as Kirin Narayan reminds us, “Reading transports us.” She frames the project of writing place with a question: “How do ethnographers enhance this journey so that readers glean facts about a place and something of the feel of being there?”

The “arrival trope” is, of course, the most common of ethnographic devices. I have one. You probably do, too. But the arrival trope has been rightly criticized for fetishizing the state of finally being somewhere else, ready to begin anthropological fieldwork. We probably all recall Malinowski’s directive to “imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight.”

This impulse to recount arrivals speaks to the fact that ethnographic narratives are concerned with movement—from place to place.

The primary means by which I move from place to place, both in the field and closer to home, is walking. When I work in Kolkata, the act of winding my way through pedestrian congestion, in and out of markets, and through that city’s metro is a constant sensorial overload. When I write about Kolkata or Darjeeling, I use the local equivalents of the “wicked huge Radio Shack” to draw readers into these movements—and importantly the sensations of

84—SARAH BESKY
these movements. As Alex Nading has argued, “trailing” the movements of people and other creatures can be a way of carrying place seamlessly from fieldwork into narrative.4

When I write about place, then, I close my eyes and reimagine walking. This is less visualization exercise and more constructive daydreaming. What does it smell like? What does it sound like? What does it look like? What does it feel like? How do I get there from here? How many Dunkin Donuts (or their Himalayan or Kolkatan analogues) do I pass on the way? I find that on my first couple of drafts, these descriptions are way overwritten, but with more editing, place starts to tighten and even serves to bolster historical and theoretical elements of books and articles as well.

When I read an ethnography, I want to know where I am in the world. When I write, I want to communicate not just stories about people but also stories about landscapes.

Most anthropological monographs begin with a field-site chapter as the first substantive section after the introduction. (I would add that many proposals and articles allow for a field-site/background section after the introduction as well.) Sometimes these chapters can be a total slog to write (and read). Perhaps we tell ourselves that we need to get a lot of historical and contextual material across so that the (more fun to write) subsequent ethnographic material makes sense.

We should bring our creative ethnographic writing skills to these chapters, but we should also work to pepper the remainder of our narratives with more place descriptions. Such descriptions can serve as a medium to convey forward what might otherwise be an episodic tale. Amitav Ghosh beautifully accomplishes this kind of conveyance, both in his intimate fluvial story about life, work, and uncertainty in the Sundarbans, _The Hungry Tide_, and in his epic account of Mandalay, Calcutta, and the spaces in between, _The Glass Palace_.5 An unfolding landscape—of plants, animals, infrastructures, and histories of change and perturbation—can be as much a “character” in an ethnographic narrative as a human interlocutor, as encapsulated in ethnographies by Julie Cruikshank, Laura Ogden, Hugh Raffles, and Anna Tsing.6

While I was writing my dissertation, Kirin Narayan, who was my dissertation advisor, reminded me on multiple occasions that “all quotations need context.” We all know that quotations don’t just happen, yet they often seem to magically appear in the narratives we craft. We need to ask ourselves: _Where_ was I? What was going on during this conversation? Was I plucking tea? Was I making tea? Was I drinking tea? Was I holding a baby while someone else performed similar labors? Or were we walking?
Without a grounding in place, narratives don’t flow. They *caahn’t get theyah from heeyah*. Voices appear out of nowhere. Ethnographic narratives, then, are like New Englanders giving directions. Where to turn? Certainly, “two lefts and a right” will get you there, but what about that kid on the corner selling fireworks? Turn here? At the place you can get a good peach cobbler—but not on Sundays, lest you be overrun by the after-church crowd? This kind of context building—the folksy chatter that can seem so superfluous to the weighty, critical questions we’re asking—provides an excellent opportunity for giving stories a physical medium in which to live.

**Notes**

An earlier version of this essay appeared online in *Savage Minds: Notes and Queries in Anthropology*, March 23, 2015.


