

## **Adopt a Photograph: Ethnographic Fiction Exercise**

You have already adopted one photograph from the exhibit, *Staging Selves: Cameroonian Portrait Photography*, currently on display in the Gould Library. When you adopted this image, you embarked on an ever deepening relationship with the studio photographer and his client. This relationship will be explored and articulated through several written assignments. You have already completed the first assignment, an observational paper. You have also begun to read and understand more about the social context of Cameroonian photography, history, and identities. Now you are ready to launch into an experimental and creative writing assignment, a bit unusual in an anthropology class—creating a piece of ethnographic fiction inspired by your adopted photo.

**The assignment:** Write a **three to four page piece of ethnographic fiction**, in the form of a play or story incorporating your photo and your knowledge thus far of African ethnography. Your story or play might focus on the studio photographer taking your adopted photo, on the photographic subject, on the situation prompting the photo shoot, or on the use to which the photo is put—the life of the photo and its subjects *after* it was shot. There are innumerable possibilities. The point is to be creative using what you’ve learned about the photographic experience in Africa—why and how people have photos taken of themselves, how they use these photos, and how others use them.

Some things to attend to in ethnographic fiction include: 1) You are performing a type of storytelling; 2) this storytelling should capture some results of anthropological research that you have learned about Cameroon of the era and region of Toubou, Chila, and Finlak; 3) to write a good story, you need to set the scene, develop characters, and describe some sort of action.

Athol Fugard’s play, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* provides one example—that you have read—of ethnographic fiction centered around a photo, and around an encounter in a photo studio. Some other examples of ethnographic fiction set in Africa include Michael Jackson’s *Barawa and the Way Birds Fly in the Sky*, Paul Stoller’s *Jaguar*, and *Return to Laughter* by Eleanor Smith Bowen (a.k.a. Laura Bohannon). Two notable memoirs by an anthropologist-writer couple are *Parallel Worlds* and *Braided Worlds*, by Alma Gottlieb and Philip Graham. Anthropologist Kirin Narayan offers an interesting and helpful reflection on ethnographic fiction in the abstract to her article, “Ethnography and Fiction: Where is the Border?” published in *Anthropology and Humanism* 24(2):134-147, in 1999:

“Writing ethnographic texts and writing fiction, I argue, involves different perspectives on (1) the disclosure of process, (2) generalization, (3) representations of subjectivity, and (4) accountability. Such orienting landmarks indicate the presence of a border [between ethnography and fiction], but it is a border neither impermeable nor fixed. To acknowledge this border is also to allow for mindful border crossings that may potentially enrich both ethnography and fiction.”

Lest you doubt that ethnographic fiction is “legitimate,” The Society for Humanistic Anthropology holds an annual fiction competition, “to encourage anthropologists to use alternative literary genres to explore anthropological concerns associated with the four fields of anthropology.” Winning entries are announced at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, and published in the journal, *Anthropology and Humanism*.

The combination of this ethnographic fiction exercise and the next assignment on analytic anthropological writing aims to heighten your awareness of writing for different audiences, melding playfulness and seriousness.

The assignment is due, in electronic form, on **Friday April 20, 9:00 a.m.**