The authors of *Perpetrators: Encountering Humanity's Dark Side*, Antonius Robben and Alexander Laban Hinton, have written a book that can help scholars of genocide studies and mass violence, authoritarian regimes, and others looking to broaden how to write about the difficult elements of humanity.

Robben and Hinton set out to at once impart insights they acquired through decades of ethnographical research into genocide and mass violence, which they call *phronesis* following the ancient Greeks, and to do so in experimental and thought-provoking ways. *Perpetrators* is more of a guide than a “how-to” manual, and yet it manages to provide the reader with practical and suggestive ideas for conducting ethnographic research and writing in a way that avoids the rigidity imposed by academia. Not everyone who picks up *Perpetrators* will appreciate its experimental nature, but this is the book's strongest feature given the difficult nature of the topic.

The introduction describes the meeting of the two authors in Buenos Aires in 2010 where the idea for the book first emerged. Like most academic collaborations, the one for *Perpetrators* began over coffee and a shared topic. Robben and Hinton then lay out the theoretical, methodological, and secondary source material on which the book is based. What separates *Perpetrators* from traditional academic books, however, is that the authors approach their writing using creative methods. For instance, rather than simply describe the meeting between the two at a Buenos Aires coffee shop, what ensues is a reimagined dialogue between “Tony” (Robben) and “Alex” (Hinton). This not only serves to provoke thought but also to set the tone for the rest of the book. I felt as though I were part of the conversation taking place, but my inability to respond as in a real-life conversation forced me to consider the ways my research and methodology fit within the conversation and whether creative writing is transferrable, let alone appropriate, in academic writing.
There are three parts to the book as well as two interludes. Part 1 outlines the authors' experiences with interviewing perpetrators. Chapter 1, written by Alex, provides some background on the Cambodian genocide and his own intersubjective encounters with interviews by looking at the genocide through the lens of spectacle. Chapter 2 seeks to understand the Argentine perpetrators (during the military dictatorship, 1974 to 1983) from their own perspectives. This includes the actions, emotions, and lived experiences of the perpetrators. To do so, Tony uses the concepts of cognitive and affective empathy to examine “the conscious and unconscious dynamics of ethnographic encounters” (p. 33). Both conceptualizations of empathy are especially helpful for historians, whether of genocide and mass violence or otherwise, to help them get into the lived experiences of the actors of their studies. Adopting cognitive empathy, for example, can help researchers to understand the research subject’s worldviews, while affective empathy helps researchers understand the subject’s experiences. Both require the researcher to understand the subject “without identifying or merging with the other” (p. 70). Arguably, any researcher of humans, humanity, and culture can gain from employing cognitive and affective empathy, not to forgive or dismiss the perpetrators’ actions but to understand them. Employing either conceptualization, let alone both, is understandably difficult for perpetrator researchers: to do so suggests aligning oneself, even for a moment, with the worst aspects of humanity. And yet what makes using both types of empathy worthwhile is the opportunities they provide to reveal those darkest elements. In other words, using cognitive and affective empathy allows researchers to understand their subjects on the subjects’ own terms.

Part 2 focuses on dreams that both authors have had. While both Robben and Hinton are anthropologists, Tony relates his dreams using the psychoanalysis of his therapist, whom he visited for two years in Buenos Aires, in chapter 3. Alex, meanwhile, recreates his dream in chapter 4, titled “Ruins.” Alex uses the metaphor of ruins to relate to the impact of researching mass violence and its perpetrators. Perpetrators create ruins not only literally, by destroying cities and lives, but also by ruining everyone who encounters them. In this way, anyone who encounters genocide and mass violence—from victims to perpetrators, from researchers and educators to our students—is sullied by it.

Part 3’s challenge is to help with writing about perpetrators. Tony’s chapter 5 uses Albert Camus’s novel *The Stranger* (1942) as a literary example of how to portray perpetrators as both humans in their own right and as monsters, as the “dark side” of humanity. This chapter takes a polyphonic approach by bringing in the perspectives of several actors involved in a massacre of sixteen Argentine guerrillas in 1972, from survivors to the generals responsible for the murders. The following chapter discusses the idea of curation in relation to writing. Alex argues that his choice to use experimental writing to better present the tortures and murders at the S-21 camp in Cambodia was necessary to better grasp both the ambiguity and evocative elements of the Cambodian genocide.

Between the three parts are two interludes of creative nonfiction and literary forms of writing. The first set of interludes includes Alex’s essay about a Cambodian victim, perpetrator, and witness, and Tony imagines a monologue by an Argentine mother whose three children were disappeared. The second interlude has Tony narrating an Argentine general’s justification for participating in the military dictatorship, while Alex presents a poem about perpetrators at the S-21 security center. Both interludes work not only to break the tension presented by the difficult topic of perpetration but also to convey information in new and creative ways.

By presenting the information in such ways, the authors manage to argue not only that more creative forms of writing can be useful to present an argument but also that it may be required. In-
indeed, the topic of perpetration can be so overwhelming, even for more seasoned researchers like Robben and Hinton, that to fully articulate the immensity of perpetration is difficult. And yet the authors manage to artfully pull it off. For instance, the fourth stanza from Alex’s poem “Interrogation: Comrade Duch’s Abecedarian” from the second interlude captures well the multifaceted perpetrator Kang Kek Iew, a.k.a. Comrade Duch:


All these terms are accurate to describe Duch, yet no single one fully captures the figure on its own while also conveying the interdisciplinary nature of studying perpetrators: to write only about Duch’s life as a math teacher overlooks his subsequent role as an equally meticulous torturer and vice versa. Perhaps, too, it would be necessary to understand his place as an eldest son to fully understand how and why he perpetrated the crimes at S-21. Creatively writing about the most notorious perpetrator from the Cambodian genocide in this manner arguably imparts a more rounded understanding of the man, without either forgiving or condemning him.

Tony and Alex alternate chapters and readers are also introduced to interjections from the other author, a recurring motif throughout the book. Sometimes these can be jarring, leaving one wishing that more were said on the topic. At other times the interjection either provides a necessary respite or poses a question that the reader might have, while raising other, sometimes profound ideas. In his chapter on “Seductive Perpetrators,” for example, Tony is interrupted by Alex, who not only raises questions but also relates the discussion to other parts of the book, a reflexive process that the authors argue is necessary for ethnographic researchers of perpetrators. Yet Alex’s question goes much further and asks whether one needs to consider the “seduction” on the part of the ethnographer. In other words, he asks whether researchers need to be aware of their own conscious and unconscious manipulations of the ethnographic process. Tony’s response that subjectivity is necessary, especially when considering the inherent power imbalance that exists between ethnographer and research participant, raises an important point for all researchers, not just ethnographers. I would also argue that subjectivity extends to researchers outside of perpetrator research, too, and that one’s biases, relative power relation to one’s topic, and personal relationship to research topic all need to be considered. In other words, though the book deals with quite a specific topic—ethnographic perpetrator research—it raises questions, provides understandings, and gives insights into other types of research, not just for political violence.

Perpetrators would be a helpful read for many researchers dealing with difficult research topics, from genocide and mass violence studies to political violence and beyond. Not only would ethnographers gain from this book but so too would people working in other fields. Certainly, this historian has gained much insight into how to approach the darkest sides of humanity.

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