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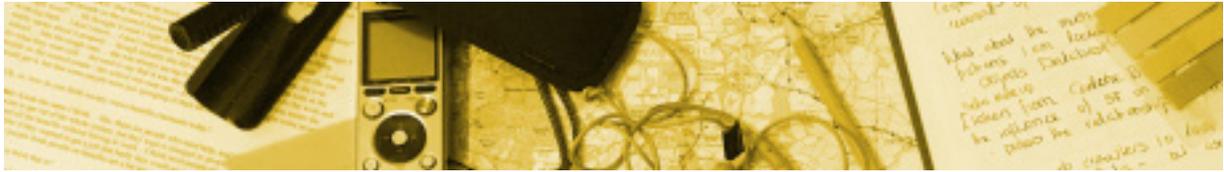
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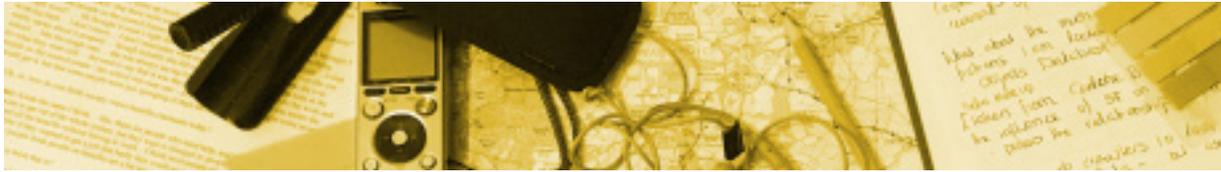
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**[Review] *Critical Fabulations:
reworking the methods and margins
of design* by Daniela K. Rosner**

MIT Press, 2018, 216 pp. (Hardcover)

Chris Scheidler



As an ethnographer of multimedia production, I'm often between several worlds. I'm between the historic activist art and the contemporary activist-artist seeking to claim the provenance of earlier radicals. I'm between the designers of multimedia production technologies and software and the users of software meandering through the technological constraints. In each field visit and during each participant observation, I find myself between individual designers figuring out how to put images, sounds, and words to work and the practices and processes I've witnessed others take or practices I've performed myself. Daniela Rosner's (2018) *Critical fabulations* offers useful reflections on how ethnographers can approach both the design of technologies that enable media production and the practices participants perform with these technologies while making their own artifacts.

In the first half of the book, Rosner retells and remakes the stories that became Design thinking canon and theory. Although ethnographers may find these chapters less helpful in content, we are, after all, not trained in Design schools, the method of Rosner's deconstruction is worthwhile to take note of. Rosner explains her method as one of "fabulating" or telling stories of difference in order to deconstruct and reimagine a future that is more just for all. Citing the feminist slogan "the personal is political," Rosner tells not only the history of Design theory but also her own intellectual lineage alongside the stories of the feminist technoscience theorists, Lucy Suchman and Donna Haraway, from whom she draws her theoretical and practical revisions from. The resulting work she creates seeks to imagine Design theory and practice from the margins and through difference. By giving salient attention to the margins and difference, Rosner's project promises a more meaningful and ethical engagement with the process of design. Ethnographers, too, may find Rosner's unsettling of production processes as a gentle reminder that despite the technological logics of multimedia design the practices of design are always materially and culturally contingent.

Rosner's promise for a more meaningful and ethical engagement with design process is fulfilled as she tells the story of past projects and her reflections and revisions as those projects grew. In particular, Rosner tells the story of *Spyn* a smartphone interface developed by Rosner and others that allowed knitters to virtually embed media into their knitted projects. *Spyn* works by photographing a knitted garment with a smartphone and "pinning" a media file to the specific location (determined by row of knit) on the garment. In this way, a hat knitted for a friend could contain various invisible barcodes that the friend would scan in order to retrieve the digital messages woven for them. On the whole, this technological device that literally turns digital stories into giftable and wearable materials is fascinating and worth further consideration. Yet, Rosner troubles her tools by staying with the story and telling more. In the first iteration of *Spyn*, Rosner followed traditional processes of Design Thinking from contextual inquiry, ideation, problem definition, prototyping, and beyond. Such invention techniques, however, are underwritten by ubiquitous logic that seeks, among other things, universal and technological solutions. Rosner juxtaposes *Spyn*'s initial iteration among young affluent knitters and then her later work and interactions with a more diverse "guild" of knitters.

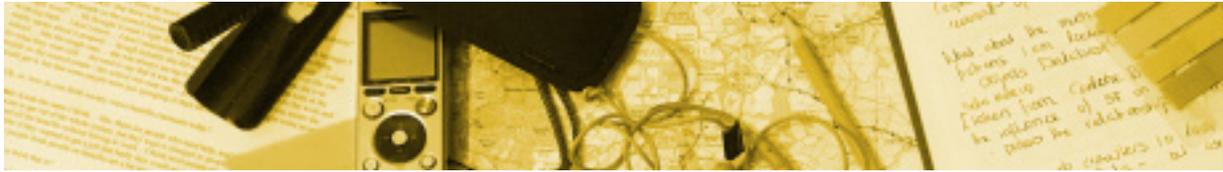


Here the needs and desires of each knitter leave them questioning if they want *Spyn* at all. For instance, some participants guard their knitting craft as personal or professional secrets and others find the interface works only with lengthy knitting sessions that exacerbate their arthritis. It is in this juxtaposition that Rosner offers her most salient critiques of Design processes.

Rosner articulates four revisions to the underwritten logic of Design thinking. The *individualism* that leads researchers and designers to imagine the sole-user of a product becomes a critical attention to *alliances* or the many relationships and collective practices. The logic of *objectivism* that often constructs the researcher or designer as having scientific distance and impartiality becomes *recuperations* or a critical attention to find absent and displaced stories and perspectives. Similarly, an underlying logic of *universalism*, or the assumption that all participants are of a particular mold, skill-set, and proclivity is challenged to become an attention to *interferences* or recognizing difference, particularly as it relates to situated bodies. Finally, Rosner challenges the ubiquitous logic of *solutionism*, the belief that the creation of artifacts and tools is teleologically capped, and instead offers an alternative in the way of *extensions* or the ways in which technology and design stay, circulate, change, and are changed with practitioners.

For each of these revisions, Rosner offers up quick examples from other projects that demonstrate her new heuristics in practice. For instance, Rosner demonstrates how the creation of Turkopticon, a browser extension for curating employer reviews from Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers (Irani & Silberman, 2014), approaches design through alliances rather than individualism. In this way, key to the creation of this interface is focusing on the already existing potentials for alliances across MTurk workers. Rosner continues demonstrating her new Design thinking framework into examples of public art installments, a zine, and a parody brand. Each example ends with a series of prompts or questions that designers of technology or media might ask. For instance, “Whose invisible work underpins your own? How might it inform your inquiry” and “What histories or practices might have been suppressed or elided” (p. 88). The penultimate chapter expands these examples through longer discussion of Rosner’s new Design thinking heuristics (e.g. alliances, recuperations, interferences, and extensions). Such “fabulating in practice” calls for moving beyond, “typical ethnographic or design engagements ... [and] bringing lost or unacknowledged situations into the present” (p. 119).

As a PhD student studying modality practices (i.e. the ways writers and designers navigate a plethora of communicative possibilities), I have found myself drawn to various “design” literatures (e.g. graphic design, technological/software design, Design thinking,) as a way of making sense of the many interactions and processes that go into making multimodal work. Increasingly, I have come to question the usefulness of past ethnographies (primarily in literacy and writing studies) at rendering modality practices responsibly and ethically, as well as legibly, to fellow researchers. The practices of creating with sound, visual, textual, and others are undeniably complex and often deeply personal. For instance, Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller (2012) have shown that media communication across some transnational migrants is informed not merely by



abstracted capabilities of modes and media but instead by the inter- and intra- personal affective relationships enabled, in part, by modes and media. Yet, many of the texts informing multimodality theories deny too much the possibility of the personal to shape actions with modality. Sarah Pink's (2011) call for greater attention to ethnography by multimodal scholars has seemingly shaped scores of ethnographers, as evidenced, at least, by the creation of multimodal ethnographic journals such as *entanglements*, but has yet to fully coalesce toward new theories of modality. Complicating calls for new articulations of modality theories are scholars who see the monolithic current-traditional approach to modality (i.e. informed by western categories of perception and literacy) as unproblematic or "inconsequential" when the subject of such research takes place in dominant culture and dominant media practices (Jewitt & Leder Mackley, 2019, p. 99). Yet, radical difference and subversion, even incrementally so, exist in all places and moments. Perhaps by better embracing the alliances, recuperations, interferences, and extensions that Rosner calls for, multimodal researchers and designers might find ways of attending to: a multitude of material concerns and entanglements, a recognition of occluded narratives, a challenge to disembodied views of making and experiencing, and an accountability for all the people and things in the design process.

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