# The Case for Letting Anthropology Be Quarantined: COVID and the End of Ethnographic Presence

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Is this the end of the physical field? Over the past several months, there have been hundreds of semi-panicked social media posts: if I can't go into the field, perhaps I can go into the digital field? Well – there have been several, thoughtful posts from digital anthropologists on this sentiment, including a recent one in GeekAnthropologist. Reading through Twitter, though, we can't help but notice that these would-be digital anthropologists don't really want to be digital at all. And they're not really proposing digital anthropology. If you're studying the lives of people in their (physical) communities, can you really do digital anthropology? In other words, if people are undertaking online/offline lives (whether under quarantine or not), are those lives best understood through digital anthropology?  Or, are you talking about what we have called 'networked anthropology' (Collins and Durington 2014)?

In networked anthropology, we acknowledge the skein of digital and physical connections in people's lives, and we try to recognize and enable the capacities of people to represent those lives through networked, media platforms that make sense to them. Networked anthropology starts from the assumption that life extends through real and virtual platforms simultaneously—that it can't be easily parsed (as people believed it could be in the 1990s) into a "physical" life and an "online" life.  When we shift from individuals to the neighborhoods and communities where they live and work, the same logic applies. Communities exist as physical places, and embodied social relations. But communities also exist through countless digital communication tools and social media platforms. In reality, these are mutually constitutive, and it makes little sense to divide one from the other in any ontologically decisive way.

In a quarantined world, though what happens to these individuals and communities? They still exist, of course. Though with regards to the production of ethnography, one element is missing: the anthropologist. But only that.  Even without the anthropologist, social and cultural life continue. Yet, tellingly, most of the anxiety over the fate of anthropology in the era of pandemic centers around the anthropologist. The question of how "I" will complete ethnographic research revolves around the "I". "I" will not be there for participant observation, for interviews; "I" will not be in situ.  We don't want to

minimize these concerns. In a discipline where field research is very nearly a professional qualification, the pandemic threatens the futures of a whole cohort of graduate students.

But just because the anthropologist cannot go into the field does not mean that "the field" disappears. And more than that—the documentation and theorization of social and cultural life continue as people record and comment on the things that happen in their lives and in their communities. And, why, exactly, did "the field" need us to begin with?

More than anyone else, it was Malinowski (and his various hagiographers) that enshrined "presence" as the sine qua non condition of anthropology, its ontology and epistemology (Stocking 1992). And while this has been extraordinarily productive, it has also introduced a host of tensions—Malinowski's colonial metaphysics imbricating anthropology in gendered and racialized inequalities, and this metaphysics of presence conjuring up spectres of Derridean absence.

This unease, of course, is a familiar sentiment in anthropology, whether fieldwork takes us thousands of miles away or only hundreds of meters. When we "leave" the field, it continues without us, while the records we have laboriously produced become superannuated in the actual lives of people. It is this unease that lies beneath the loss of one's fieldsite. Not only will "the field" continue without me, but, perhaps, my understanding of that field will never be complete.

In this sense, networked anthropology is about capitulation—perhaps we really weren't that important? But we can certainly help people in their own efforts to represent and communicate their identities and communities, and this is, I think, what (at least some) of our colleagues have already been doing. We have advocated for a similar strategy in terms of "pushing along" the social media and work of our interlocutors rather than trying to speak for or represent their social lives (Durington, Collins, Randolph and Young 2017). Also, it was important to include our two collaborators who documented the uprising that occurred in Baltimore in the wake of Freddie Gray's death as co-authors to follow this ethos.

Last summer, we worked on a project in a small neighborhood in Baltimore undergoing rapid gentrification that was leading to the displacement of a long-standing community of African American residents. Collaborating with children at a community center, we helped them (co)produce maps, photographs, video and audio interviews that we put together for an app tour, an exhibit and a performance. It was a great project to work on, and the article that we are submitting on this includes all of them as co-authors, too. In light of our present pandemic, and in the interest of protecting communities from us, it occurs to us that we didn't really need to be there at all. Sure – we needed to talk to people and see what they were up to. In the end, though, the images and interviews are produced by people in the community. Our point: if we never actually stepped foot in that neighborhood, that would not make it digital anthropology, even though we've helped them produce several digital records of their work. We would just be doing networked anthropology – anthropology with people who are physically (not virtually) in their communities, and with whom we can interact with digitally.
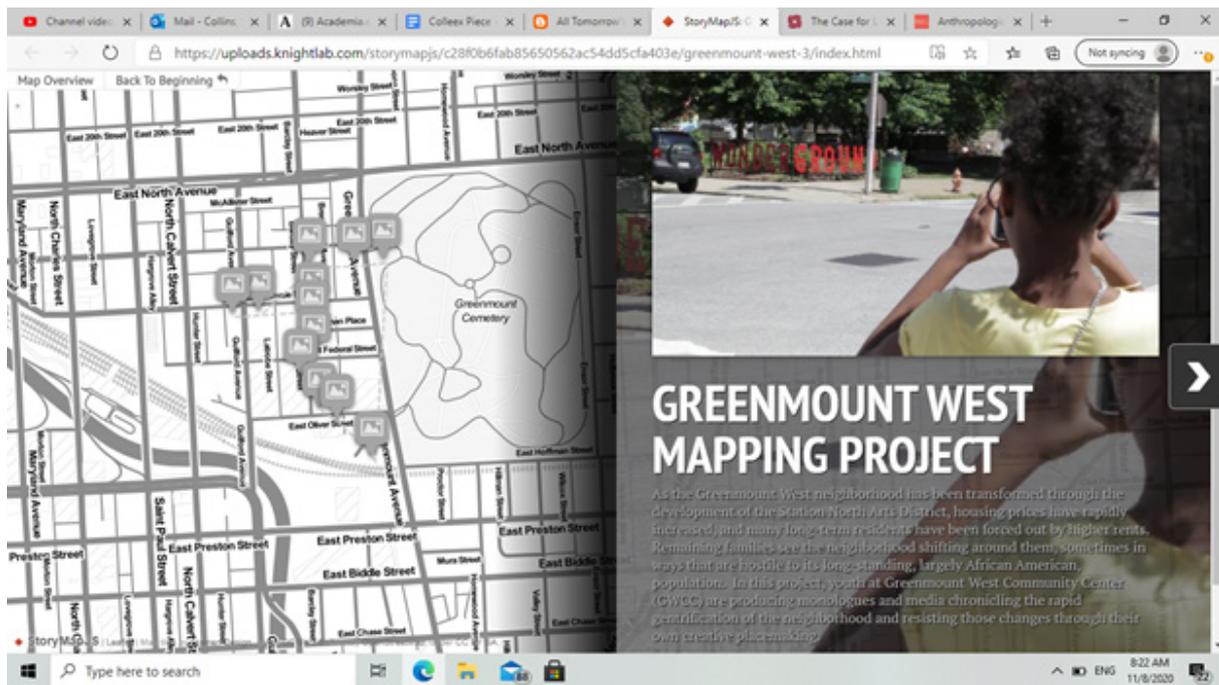
FIG 1. (Screenshot from a Storymap of our project)

We have put these insights into practice over the past four months with a project on bridging the "digital divide" in Baltimore. Animated by inequalities in access to both digital technologies and broadband access in majority-African American communities—both exacerbated by the move to remote instruction in Baltimore City schools—our project engages local residents as ethnographers documenting the obstacles to technology access and enlists them in design and wireframing apps and platforms that would better meet the needs of their community.

We are not meeting these student researchers. Instead, we speak over Zoom channels once a week, and track their progress through a transmedia blogging app, Padlet, where they post journal entries, interviews, illustrations or found media. Ultimately, they are the anthropologists in the field, and we are the facilitators.

Of course, this relationship is hardly novel in anthropology, although it has been generally one-sided. Throughout the nineteenth century, the work of indigenous ethnographers has gone unrecognized--with Boas grudgingly granting George Hunt co-authorship. Two Crows may have "denied this," but he never gets authorial credit in Omaha Sociology. But this project belongs to these students, and we are there to enable their work. We're consultants.

As it turns out, looking at one another in boxes on a screen creates the possibility of dialogue and engagement. It may even open up new possibilities of interaction and digital equity despite the socioeconomic barriers of the well-known digital divide. This does not, however, constitute a metaphysics of (digital) presence. Technology does not summon presence back into a quarantined field. Instead, these video conferencing

platforms, and the other tools that have been utilized for multimodal anthropology, suggest a field of flattened connections (Collins, Durington and Gill 2017).

We don't know when the infection rates and death toll of the pandemic will subside. But it seems likely that we will not be able to undertake our *in situ* research for some time. Even if we can go into the field, it may be in fits and starts, with pandemic flare-ups mandating our social distancing once again. But just because we are not in situ doesn't mean that people in the communities where we work aren't in situ! Moreover, our engagements with people through multiple media do not vouchsafe the "ethnographer's magic." Instead, connections represent articulations along a network of partialities--with no privileged anthropologist's gaze amid the tumult of everyday life.

Summarizing sociocultural anthropology in 2019, Ryan Cecil Jobson writes that "US anthropology confronted the 'dark times' of the present not only as ethnographic objects but as existential threats to the practice of anthropology" (2020: 260). These challenges, however, reveal the extent to which anthropology has been a party to Anthropocene forces, challenges that should force a reckoning. He continues: "To let anthropology burn permits us to imagine a future for the discipline unmoored from its classical objects and referents" (ibid: 261).

COVID-19 has been a disaster of apocalyptic proportions. And it is one without a silver lining. We see no benefit to rampant death and destruction. At the same time, the pandemic underscores the "slow apocalypse" at the core of advanced capitalism, and it also begs the question: if anthropology is ontologically and methodologically dependent upon global travel, exotic field sites and corporeal presence, then hasn't it been part of these processes all along? And If anthropology has been part of the pandemic, then isn't it right that it should be quarantined?

In a way, "digital anthropology" as a "workaround" for the quarantine reinscribes that same conceit - only here the aura of presence is replaced by that of technological connection. If we can't be there, then our broadband connections will grant us the same panoptic scope over "our" fieldsites. This is, nevertheless, an understandable position to taken especially in a field that still elevates ethnographic presence above all other forms of engagement. This is readily apparent on social media, particularly among our younger colleagues in graduate school. One only has to check *#AnthroTwitter* to see the real obstacles and issues this emerging group of anthropologists have to grapple with in terms of job opportunities and making a living. But one can also see the tensions between becoming part of a discipline and simultaneously attempting to upend it by decolonizing and critiquing the field and its methods justifiably. It is a fascinating quandry to destroy and build simultaneously but it is an instance we have seen before. Understand, we are fully in support of decolonizing anthropology, but the methodological desire and demand to be in person represents those historical tendencies that usurp local voice and privilege anthropological insight. So the angst of gaining legitimacy by presence in the field is contradictory to the ethos pursued. By now, we are all used to that peculiar hypocrisy in anthropology that decries colonization and its authorizing gaze, but that still seems to insist on presence in order to undertake anthropology. Perhaps enough of that?

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