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Data-Stories for Post-Ethnography

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Penelope Papailias

Abstract:
Attentiveness to contemporary genres of database narratives, or data-stories, might help us imagine a robust post-ethnography, or an ethnography-after-print. Experimenting with these novel spaces of articulation, modes of address and media formats could contribute to refunctioning the way anthropological knowledge is disseminated and produced in contemporary media ecology. In turn, this experimentation might call into question ethnography’s very purpose: documentation, representation, argumentation or speculation, conversation, creation. Shifts in media format, I will suggest, can also reorient the relation of social and cultural research to broader publics through strategic collaborations with the arts and activism.

Critical wonder
In his classic 1974 Television: Technology and Cultural Form, the British literary theorist Raymond Williams does not disguise his delight in the sensory experience of watching television. After describing the many ways that television remediates received forms such as film and theater, or has led to the emergence of hybrid and novel genres, he concludes that “it is ironic to have to say, finally, that one of the innovating forms of television is television itself.” In order to appreciate “its intrinsic visual experiences, for which no convention and no mode of description have been prepared or offered,” he counsels turning off the sound to perceive the “experience of visual mobility, of contrast of angle, of variation of focus, which is often very beautiful” (1990, p. 70).

Williams’ captivation by television, indeed his ability to view beauty in it, reflects a rare, affirmative approach to media critique. Williams does not chide the public for watching television rather than, say, reading a book. Instead he situates himself as a fellow viewer, enraptured in front of the telly. Furthermore, in recognizing television’s unique “capacity to enter a situation and show what is actually happening in it” (1990, p. 65), he takes television seriously as a discourse warranting scholarly analysis and a potentially valuable modality of cultural documentation and pedagogy.
At the same time, as a cultural marxist, Williams was no naive booster of television. After a week on an ocean liner crossing the Atlantic, he describes the shock of encountering U.S. commercial television, which had long done away with the niceties still in effect in the U.K., such as signals marking the beginning and end of programs. American television, by contrast, was already unrelentingly interpolating advertisements and trailers during broadcasts. Williams used this experience to develop his well-known theory of “flow.” Rather than watching the discrete programs listed in a television guide, viewers, he noted, were “watching television” for hours on end. In short, despite his fascination with television, Williams did not overlook the implications for consumer capitalism that this flow was built around commercial breaks never indicated in the program.

In this article, I suggest bringing a similar critical wonder to contemporary media genres that repurpose preexisting media formats or have been “born digital,” such as selfies, TikTok challenges, memes, YouTube tutorials, prestige television, online gaming, geolocated walks, podcasts, machinima, screenshots and GIFs (Frosh, 2018). Rather than bemoan the fact that everyone is looking at their phones all the time, playing video games, binge watching television series on Netflix and uploading ephemeral and silly stories on social media platforms, I believe that as ethnographers we have much to learn from this cultural production not just as a potential subject of cultural critique through digital ethnography, but as a prompt for cultural production.¹

If we briefly “turn off the sound” to look at, rather than through, these novel formats or “data-stories,” as I will call them, we might discover clues as to how to better tell stories about, in and for the contemporary world based on our research. A position of critical wonder combines geeky fascination with technoculture and a deep critique of the power in the platform. One way this approach could be manifested is through the “hacking” of the contemporary digital media ecology: playing with(in) it and repurposing its formats, affordances and aesthetics. In the examples I will discuss, practitioners, for instance, revamp location tracking technologies to make non-realist, posthuman media walks, create role-playing games to deconstruct stereotypes, orchestrate mock assemblies out of activists’ video archives and bring backstage interviews on video conferencing platforms into the foreground of ethnographic re-presentation.

I would further suggest that these experiments, in becoming “unbound” from the logic of the scholarly book, contribute to refunctining the way anthropological knowledge is disseminated and produced—indeed its very purpose. This shift in genre is linked to a potential reorientation of the relation of social and cultural research to broader publics through strategic collaborations with the arts and activism.

My thoughts in this essay take as their starting point the experimental ethnographic works presented at Data-Stories: New Media Aesthetics and Rhetorics for Critical Digital Ethnography Confestival (conference + festival) in the early summer of 2019, as well as my experience producing this event with a team of early career researchers and collaborators

¹Reflecting on the promising conjuncture of design ethnography and multimodal anthropology, anthropologist Elizabeth Chin has noted a similar disconnect between the abundance of theory about objects in anthropology and the paucity of attempts to work with physical materials toward the “manifesting of ideas as things” (2017, p. 543).
based at the University of Thessaly in Volos, Greece. I will also discuss other experiences of creation and collaboration in which I have been involved that productively blurred the boundaries between classroom, lab and community.

A quick guide to data-stories

In the left corner of the Instagram app, a blank circle with a plus sign beckons to be filled with “Your story.” Tap it and a menu opens with various prompts. You can add elements. Stickers, text, GIFs, location markers, hashtags, fonts, filters, photos from your personal gallery or an image taken at that moment (Fig. 1). You can tag your followers, ensuring that your story will pop up in their feeds.

Figure 1. Assembling an Instagram story on the interface. Screengrab Penelope Papailias.

The Data-Stories Confestival was held between May 31st and June 2nd, 2019 at the Rooftile and Brickworks Museum N. & S. Tsalapatas in Volos, Greece. The other members of the organizing team were the program coordinator Constantinos Diamantis, Petros Petridis, Eleni Tsatsaroni and Nikos Paschoulis.
Even though stories disappear within twenty-four hours, their ephemerality is relative. You can archive them. Friends, lovers and enemies can screenshot them. Still, it would be fair to say that the communicative function of stories outweighs their documentary one: what’s at stake is appearing to others and interfacing across the network in the now, not creating an idealized record of the future past (Rubinstein and Sluis, 2008).

Fair enough. But why use the word story to categorize these on-the-fly, derivative and fragmentary image-texts? There is little in the way of plot. The uploader is the author and usually the main, sometimes only, character. Visual forms and aesthetics predominate: beyond the words used in tags, the verbal is minimal. As improbable as it may sound, I would like to argue, that the Insta story nonetheless is precisely where we should be looking as ethnographers to understand both how subjects are “making data-stories” in the age of database, algorithm and platform, as well as how “making data stories” are making them—their subjectivities, relationships and networks.

In his classic *The Language of New Media* (2001), media theorist Lev Manovich identified database and algorithm as the basis of a new cultural logic of communication and expression that would supplant the twentieth-century’s hegemonic narrative-based genres such as film and the novel. Even though Manovich has been critiqued for stating that database and narrative are “natural enemies” (p. 199), it would be more correct to say that he was identifying a new storytelling principle: that of database narrative—or, what I am calling here, “data-stories.” While Manovich was writing of an Internet pre-social media and full-blown platform capitalism, many of his ideas have proved prescient.

A first key component of database logic is modularity. In high literature, the choice and order of words appears sacrosanct, fixed by the genius of the author, while the archive and dictionary of alternatives remains implicit. By contrast, in the age of databases, the inventory, as in video games, is visible and prominent (Fig. 2). A user-creator is constantly selecting elements from a drop-down menu. When everyday users compose from databases, they throw together a bunch of files—an image, a sound archive, a little text. Database artefacts—like Insta stories—are as easily composed as decomposed: their individual parts can be poached for another assemblage. These media works are dependent on the database, which emerges as an aesthetic object in its own right, generating what Manovich termed an “info-aesthetics” (p. 93). With the rise of digital culture, the axis of choice trumps that of composition. Or, in semiotic terms: “Database (the paradigm) is given material existence, while narrative (the syntagm) is de-materialized. Paradigm is privileged, syntagm is downplayed. Paradigm is real, syntagm is virtual” (p. 203).
Modularity implies non-linearity. Data-stories do not have beginnings and ends. They are not closed works, but unstable and evolving. Events, plots and causality are less important than characters and storyworlds, which can be reworked into endless sequels and derivative products (cf. Jenkins, 2006, p. 114). As the temporal dimension loses its centrality, the spatial axis comes to the fore. Temporal montage based on replacement is superseded by spatial montage that operates through addition and coexistence (Manovich, 2001, p. 272). If the movie screen promised immersion in mimetic realism, the computer screen with its “windows” draws user’s attention to a multiplicity of storyworlds. In classic database narrative, what needs to be plotted is the interface itself. Since there is no clear beginning or end, composition includes crafting “entry points” that “prepare the user for interaction and most importantly the desire for interaction” (Luers, 2014, n.p.).

Rather than impeding storytelling, this modularity instead has led to an explosion of user-generated, multimedia micro-narratives. In Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals, a book published the same year as Manovich’s, but only translated into English in 2009, the cultural theorist
Hiroki Azuma makes a similar argument from the position of the users themselves, specifically Japanese anime and manga fans. He explains that in postmodernity, with the collapse of the grand narratives of modernity that had given meaning to twentieth-century fictions, fans do not waste their time on the surface narrative; they dive behind the screen into the database to extract pieces, such as characters, settings, atmospheres and small visual elements of dress and appearance, to create their own fan fictions: “if consumers...get their hands on the entirety of the program that is a ‘grand narrative’; they will freely manufacture ‘small narratives’ with their own hands” (p. 30).

Surprisingly, these ideas, to my knowledge at least, were never taken up to analyze ethnography. With its focus on worlds, characters, atmospheres and repeated practice, rather than epochal events and famous people, traditional ethnography, especially in its structural-functionalist and structuralist forms, seems as much a precursor genre to database modularity as the avant-garde film that Manovich provides as an example. Given that anthropologists document interchangeable, everyday statements and images, the paradigmatic axis is always prominent in their heads as they write or make films; many alternative examples could be inserted at any time, while the ones not chosen remain implicit, recorded in usually hidden-from-view fieldnotes and recordings. As opposed to historiography in the historicist mode, which presented linear narratives of the nation’s progress, ethnography in the heyday of twentieth-century ethnographic realism was encyclopedic, more about pattern than plot. Indeed, the Human Relations Area Files, initially paper-based, established in 1949 by a consortium of U.S. universities to gather, sort and file a catalogue of cross-cultural ethnographic data, gesture to a long anthropological fascination with the use of computers in our research. That mainstream anthropology later embraced interpretative and literary formats has led to an amnesia regarding the discipline’s modular subconscious and computing fantasies (Seaver, 2014).

Realist ethnography also voided the text of the unitary figure of the narrator who had animated travelogues, the predecessor genre to ethnography; in the place of the traveler, an omniscient and invisible scientific narrator presented the reality of the “whole world” in sequential chapters on social institutions or cultural practices (Marcus and Cushman 1982, pp. 29-32). The crisis of representation and the postcolonial critique of anthropology in the 1980s would bring back the voice and subjectivity of the narrator, this time as a situated, reflexive and self-critical presence guiding the reader through the ethnographic monograph. The (re)turn of the “observing/self-observing subject” (Clough et. al. 2015, p. 155), while probably inadequate to addressing how the “datalogical turn” deceters the human subject and gives rise to non-representational forms (p. 148), had the effect of reinvigorating ethnography as a book-length form with literary aspirations.

Simultaneously, though, contemporary ethnographic “experiments in multimodality” (Varvantakis and Nolas, 2020) are becoming increasingly unbound by the conventions of linear narratives and argument associated with the academic book and the scholarly journal. The “messy” and rhizomatic multimedia, multilingual artefacts comprising the usually hidden database of ethnographic research are coming into view as performative traces of conversation, inquiry and collaboration, as well as prompts for new production. At the time Manovich was writing, the turn to interface was understood as a call to orchestrate “multiple paths” and “entry points” for the user to explore the ethnographer’s pre-gathered data (see Razsa, this volume). Today, it seems urgent to deemphasize the master archive and subjectivity of the anthropologist and view this interface in more allegorical terms: as
enabling the audience/viewers/users/participants to extrapolate their own works after engaging with the particular research and its theoretical questions and political dilemmas.

**Post-ethnography**

There is always a moment in introductory anthropology courses when, as an instructor, one must explain that the word ethnography refers both to the qualitative research methods distinctive to anthropology, such as participant observation and field notes, and to the book that—many, many years later—crystallizes from that research. This book is often referred to as a monograph, which means that it treats one subject in a sustained and, for many contemporary writers and readers, grueling way. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously closed the gap between research and writing, toward a decidedly literary conception of the genre, based on male genius and originality, when he posed the rhetorical question “What does the ethnographer do?” and responded “—he writes” (1973, p. 19). Resisting this Geertzian rhetorical magic wand, I want to dwell a bit in the space between *doing ethnography* and *writing an ethnography*. Specifically, I want to think about ethnography in more material terms: as a kind of writing born of late late-nineteenth and twentieth-century scholarly print culture: in other words, the ethnographic monograph as a *book*.

Unarguably, *librocentricism*—“a book-biased way of thinking, where the book stands in for certain prejudices and ideas about knowledge” (Parry, 2013, p. 16)—remains central to anthropology. The monograph continues to occupy the top of the anthropological *knowledge* pyramid, standing above a veritable ocean of diverse texts, images, videos and sounds collected and produced over the period of “doing ethnography.” Publishing a monograph ensures a researcher-author’s status as an expert. While these days a monograph hardly guarantees an academic job, *without one* it is increasingly unlikely to secure such a position and, in turn, be deemed qualified to teach students. Indeed, ironically, as “the constraints of the printed codex become harder to ignore, systemic factors combine to pressure scholars to write more of them” (Mole 2016, p. 13).

Authors do not write books; those who write books become authors—and authorities. Books and scholarly articles anchor hierarchies of credibility and boundaries between the academic and the non-academic. Thus, even though books are the “opposite of good collaborative devices” (Dattatreyan et. al., 2019, p. 3), multimodal works too often end up being the “secret epistemological projects that we do on top of what we do to produce ourselves as legible scholars or the thing with which we exhaustively spend our time, to the detriment of our career” (p.8).

There are two ways to think about the term post-ethnography, which I have invoked in the title of this article. The most obvious would center on ethnography as a research practice and draw on traditions of postcolonial critique and critical posthumanities (Braidotti, 2019). Decolonizing anthropology, or at least attempting to, means acknowledging the discipline’s connection to global white supremacy and anthropocentrism, while working toward the abolition of ethnography and its “field” to build an anthropology adequate to the work of unsettling power structures (Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre, 2020). What I want to suggest is that a second sense of post-ethnography, one that imagines an ethnography after the primacy of the monograph, or ethnography-after-print, is deeply connected to these same political concerns.
Just to be clear: I am speaking here about the Book as the cornerstone of a system of power relations in which the university has played a central role, not about the paper object that we might prefer to curl up with on our couch rather than a screen. From my perspective, the PDF, which seals text up in a Portable Document Format, is also a Book. It is not coincidental that in multimodal experiments, the unsettling of narrative forms and models of authorship, not to mention the “serious” tone of the academic book and article, cannot but come up against and expose the exclusionary and elitist practices of peer review, pay walls and limited access. Commendably, the entanglements journal, together with a number of others, is at the forefront of struggles in the Open Access movement to transform academic publishing. At the same time, we should not assume that multimodality is inherently emancipatory in relation to legacies of the Book. Indeed, many of its practitioners come from the field of visual anthropology and have only a peripheral relation to theoretical discussions, historical studies and methodological innovations in digital ethnography, new media/digital studies, critical data and algorithmic studies and digital humanities. We should not forget that fundamental characteristics of the Book, such as linearity, authorship, the complete work, mastery and originality, are also central to film. I agree that the “bad habitus” of white capitalist technofetishm easily can be reproduced in multimodal approaches that fail to take into account the disciplinary inheritances of our technologies (Takaragawa, 2019, p. 517).

In short, in the kind of post-ethnography I have in mind, experiments with genre are not aimed at amplifying or patronizingly “dumbing down” our journal articles and books to make anthropological ideas more palatable, accessible and spreadable to non-academic publics. The goal, as I see it, is unsettling the hierarchies of expertise and the relation of the university to the world that academic scholarship presupposes. Post-ethnographic formats overflow the times and spaces of the lecture room and the conference hall, engage various communities, disciplines, social actors and institutions and increasingly converge with public interventions in the arts and activism. In turn, ethnographers, as they address the contemporary situation critically and creatively, are starting to discover subjectivities and roles complementary to that of author: such as curator, performer and producer.

Anthropologist as Curator

Could we start a conversation about ethnographic writing from an Insta story? Where might it lead us?

For starters, the Insta story is brief and modular, linked in multiple, non-exclusionary ways to other stories through tags, hashtags, location markers and cultural icons like GIFs and memes. It is the antithesis of the sustained attention of the monograph, the consecrated enclosure of the library, the secure place on the syllabus. There is no final text, but a seriality of communication. In academic terms, this is the equivalent of a lateral and urgent connecting to a network in the “here and now” in which a debate is taking place: a communicative launching onto dispersed screens around a fledgling common concern. The situationality of the uploader, whose profile is always centered, cannot be avoided, while silences and disconnect are also statements in and of themselves. For many public-facing academics involved in networks and initiatives at the juncture of the academic and the artistic, at least in the Greek context with which I am most familiar, this networked participation—and the opening of one’s thoughts and archives before an official publication—has become common, while the pandemic has increased the visibility and impact of these interventions.
Thinking Insta also means turning attention to, what filmmaker and theoretician Hito Steyerl calls, the “poor image,” the “copy in motion,” which “transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction” (p.1). This set toward the copy pushes us away from the fetish of the production of images and sounds by the anthropologist herself, toward the curation and repurposing of a vast archive of preexisting images, sounds and videos (Walton, 2016, p. 62). While theoretically this is what anthropology always does—work through the social text—often this democratic ethos is not applied when it comes to making our own stories. The favoring of high-quality photographic and cinematic images and cleanly-recorded sounds, combined with the authenticity effect of conducting our own interviews and capturing the voice of our interlocutors, often works against employing “found footage.” In the case of audio recordings, while anthropologists would accept less perfect sound quality in the case of moving from the studio to the “field,” where the ambient sounds provide an authenticating sense of context and “being there,” it is less obvious that anthropologists would (re)present sounds recorded by interlocutors themselves or secondary audio recordings already in cultural circulation.

Yet, as suggested in two of the experimental genres highlighted in this portfolio, the desktop documentary (Köhn 2021) and the live participatory film (Razsa, Papailias and Dam Bracia 2021), the radical democratization of filmic production, whether that is the making of dissident protest video by anarchists or the recordings of lovers’ Skype conversations, is not only a potential topic of research, but could inspire novel kinds of ethnographic data-stories. Indeed, in both cases, the ethnographers did just that: they theorized mediation as a political and social process by building their own final output from their interlocutors’ footage. This ceding of directorial control indicates a shift to creation through montage, rather than new filming, as well as an openness to working with poor-quality images. In the case of the desktop documentary, the works are even “released” back on to social media platforms, such as YouTube, rather than being screened at specialized ethnographic and documentary film festivals. A similar case in audio form would be a podcast that assembles a multitude of preexisting sound bites. Rather than feature the anthropologist’s own interviews with subjects, an experimental ethnographic podcast along these lines might work creatively with found sounds to evoke and bring awareness to sonic contexts and platforms of recording and listening.

Demystifying the role of anthropologist as writer-director brings into focus the significance of curation, which in hierarchies of knowledge production is typically seen as secondary to the genius of the author. Yet, in a post-Book knowledge economy, curation could be an aspirational role, as we recognize in today’s data glut the importance of “people who keep things up to date, clean, host, point, and aggregate knowledge, rather than just those who are responsible for producing new knowledge (Parry, 2013, p. 18). While there is much to be said about the contemporary role of anthropologists as staff and guest curators in actual museums and art spaces, what I have in mind here are less institutional, more peer-to-peer, Pinterest and playlist types of curation. There is much, for instance, for academics to learn from practices of collaborative authorship common in fan and gamer communities with their wiki knowledge bases that subvert norms of textual ownership. In anthropology, public-facing curating practices might include creating open syllabi around critical topics, such as those that have been compiled on Trumpism, the Black Lives Matter movement and the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, editors of the American Anthropologist Public Anthropologies
Adia Benton and Yarimar Bonilla have made a point of soliciting “digital content such as storified tweets, YouTube playlists, digital mixed tapes, and #syllabi” (2017, p. 154).

Please see HTML version for accompanying video content
https://distribute.utoronto.ca/um_groups/keynote-radical-pedagogies/

Figure 3. Anthropologist Elizabeth Chin’s auto-ethnographic keynote for the Radical Pedagogies panel at the 2020 Distribute Conference addresses pandemic digitality through a tongue-in-cheek Zoom performance.

Working against the “fetish value of high resolution” (Steyerl, 2009, p. 7) though does not mean being naïve about it. The Insta story as a modular media artefact is, of course, “perfectly integrated into an information capitalism thriving on compressed attention spans, on impression rather than immersion, on intensity rather than contemplation, on previews rather than screenings” (Steyerl, 2009, p. 7). Short takes rather than long reads. Given this situation it is easy for academics to justify turning away from the frenetic TikTok world of contemporary platform capitalism to defend artisanal modes of academic and cultural production. Yet, it would be naïve to reclaim books against screens, forgetting how unequal geopolitical relations and histories of imperial and settler colonial universities are baked into their pages. Instead, approaching the contemporary media landscape with the requisite critical wonder and making products with the aesthetics, informality and humor of selfies, machinima, live feeds and Zoom meetings can be a powerful way of critiquing and theorizing our transformed experiences of space and time, proximity and distance, networks and subjectivities (Fig. 3). In turn, these productions can slip back into the platforms from which they have come, be legible within them and attract broader non-academic publics. To produce such works, though, anthropologists are increasingly needing to come on stage themselves as interviewers, presenters and facilitators in more playful, creative and embodied ways.

Anthropologist as performer

Manovich’s theories of database narrative can only take us so far in the theorization of an ethnographic data-story. While techniques of recombination, automation, compositing and spatial montage in avant-garde film provided Manovich important insights into new media, he has been critiqued for reading digital culture so heavily through this prism (Galloway, 2011). Furthermore, as media theorist Mark B. N. Hansen notes, “What is missing from Manovich’s exposition of these works is any account of the significant role accorded the body as the ‘operator’ of an alternative, post-cinematic interface with data” (2004, p. 71). Indeed, in the digital era, from the recouping of the event of film screen-ing, as in live cinema events (Willis, 2016), to the growing importance of non-representational genres, such as gaming, we have been witnessing a turn from representation and description to embodiment and performance. The concomitant transformation of reader/viewer/user into actor/player/participant potentially further decenters the anthropologist as author.

Today, video games are by far the world’s dominant entertainment industry, bringing in greater revenues than the film and music industries combined; the COVID-19 pandemic has only compounded long-term trends. Given the prominence of gaming, especially in youth culture, it is imperative to consider its impact on narrative in contemporary culture. Superficial continuities between narratives in film and video games are belied by a
consideration of the underlying processes that produce effects on the screen. Media and 
game theorists have long emphasized the significance of “procedural authorship” (Murray, 
1997) and “procedural rhetoric” (Bogost, 2007), which focus on designing the rules for 
players’ engagement with environments, objects and each other, as well as the processes by 
which texts and images appear. As a result, the representation of reality by the author 
becomes secondary to simulation of actions by the player (Petridis, 2021). Texts and images, 
in other words, do not come before reading and viewing, but are produced secondarily, 
after the rules, processes and algorithms have been executed. There is a danger of the 
designer/design team assuming the role of author and overscripting the game with 
predetermined goals. That is why the political, ethical and creative challenge in designing an 
ethnographic game is to make place for the agency of the player in relation to the game’s 
setup and its possible modifications, as well as to other players.

We can see this shift away from representation in other contemporary technologies such as 
locative or place-based media. Rather than map space in cartographic terms, the complex 
production of geodata through embodied movement in space and time could be read—or 
consciously produced—as alternative “field-”notes that center experiential, affective, 
performative, intersubjective and more-than-human relationalities (see Bubaris and Gatou, 
this volume). This place-based narration is particularly significant for ethnography, whose 
precursor and always latent genre is the travelogue with its colonial baggage of European 
white mobility and global mastery: locative narratives decenter the author-travel-hero, 
shifting attention to relationalities with others and the environment formed through 
multifarious acts of situating and remediating geodata.

This shift from representation and description to performance and embodiment in new 
media formats resonates with an ethnography that seeks to move beyond a Book-centered 
framework. For one, such a shift would inevitably de-emphasize the use of ethnographic 
data to make an argument and move toward more open-ended and dialogical modalities. 
The American law scholar David A. Westbrook notes how anthropologists and other 
academics tend to grossly overestimate the potential effectiveness of argument in changing 
the world: the “potential for social redemption through right thinking” (2008, p. 25). More 
of a posturing among themselves, argumentation, he suggests, betrays naivety about how 
politics works in the world. It is notable that a professor of law would devote an entire 
book to singling out conversation—and ethnography’s systematization of it as method—as 
an alternative to argument. He understands ethnography not as a practice of documenting 
otherness, but rather as the endeavor of “navigating” the current situation through the 
staging of meaningful exchanges with others—often equally lost and searching—regarding 
subjects of mutual concern.

Secondly, and connected to the above, this shift from the descriptive to the performative 
centers relationality and the unpredictable input of the participant/player/user into what is 
finally produced. So, what one writes—or increasingly designs collectively with others in a 
laboratory setting—is the scenario: the prompts for exploration based on ambiguous 
situations identified in our thinking, research and pedagogy, as well as the rules of 
engagement that could provoke conversation and provide a context for sharing and 
collaboration.
One starts, in other words, from questions, not answers; setups, rather than conclusions. In place of a closed text or film to be disseminated to an audience, ethnographic knowledge might become the grounds for producing new stories and even coproducing research. A temporal shift is involved as well. In place of interpretation and description of a past and present reality—what ethnography typically does, we see a growing emphasis on creative speculation of the future (Anderson et. al., 2018). As opposed to the singular and stabilized text, experimental works such as these are meant to be repeated with different participants, producing different results each time in an open-ended process (Fig. 4).

Recently, for instance, I was involved in a collaboration that brought together an anthropological research and documentation project on the quarantine experience, a public anthropology platform, a public humanities initiative, and a zine archive. Our open call for an “Extra-terrestrial Ethnographies of the Future-Present: Collaborative Writing & Zine Workshop” drew an interdisciplinary cohort of over fifty anthropologists, architects, artists, graphic designers, filmmakers, photographers, writers and zine makers. We organized them into eight random groups and assigned them the mission to visit “planet Corona” and create fictional ethnographic documents about the “new normal” of this alien world for a zine. We laid out the prompt in a publicly accessible manual. The ensuing outpouring of art works and writing far exceeded our expectations—and the normal length of a zine, demonstrating the

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3 The “Extra-terrestrial Ethnographies of the Future-Present: Collaborative Writing & Zine” Workshop, was organized as part of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Public Humanities Initiative (SNFPHI) at Columbia University, in collaboration with the University of Thessaly research project Greek Future Archive of Socialities Under Quarantine, the Anthrobombing platform and The Athens Zine Bibliotheque.
potential that can be unleashed through building interdisciplinary teams, as well as by blurring the lines between fact and fiction (Fig. 5).

![Image](Image)

**Figure 5.** The collaboratively-created zine “Extra-terrestrial Ethnographies of the Future-Present,” designed by The Athens Zine Bibliothèque. April 2021.

It is little wonder that in identifying multimodality as a potential “line of flight for an anthropology yet to come,” anthropologists Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan and Isaac Marrero-Guillamón link the turn to the performative and inventive with “a move away from established forms of authorship, representation and academic publishing towards projects that experiment with unanticipated forms, collaborations, audiences and correspondences” (2019, p. 220). In the portfolio “Making Data-Stories,” I have showcased three such “unanticipated forms” of performative data-story—the anthropological role-playing game *(Petridis 2021)*, the live participant film *(Razsa, Papailias and Dam Bracia, 2021)* and a locative media walk workshop *(Bubaris and Gatou, 2021)*. In each case, the embodied participation of the audience/player/user/maker is central, while the element of play, experiment and
collaboration is foregrounded. Participating in such games, workshops and screenings might not always be “fun” since the experience might be challenging and lead to conflict and uncomfortable self-reflection; it should be engaging.

These kinds of works demand a different kind of embodiment for the anthropologist as well, closer to the fieldworker self than the academic speaker/writer/teacher. The ethnographer often must not speak, but rather listen and intervene only strategically. The temporal succession of research and dissemination is unsettled as the conference can be refunctioned as a site not of presenting finished research, but of producing new data with the input of the participants themselves.

A final and critical observation in relation to the emergence of the anthropologist as performer/facilitator is the collaboration between anthropologists, artists and activists that such a shift usually entails. With its emphasis on embodiment, improvisation, enactment, repetition and spectacle, theater becomes an increasingly necessary space of learning and inspiration for anthropologists. At the same time, activist modes of facilitating public dialogue, as well as the format and genre of direct action public assemblies, have forged new modes of talking about and debating each other about the critical kind of social issues that are at the center of the anthropological project. There is, of course, a long tradition of merging theater and activism. A classic example is Brazilian theater artist, activist, and theorist Augusto Boal’s “Theatre of the Oppressed,” in which he asked the audience to become “Spect-Actors” (1979, p. xxi) by getting out of their seats and occupying the stage to play out conflicts and rehearse alternative possibilities to social problems. That this is not just acting in fiction, but in social reality, is reflected in the “legislative theatre” he (1998) developed when elected to city council in Rio de Janeiro in the 1990s. Audiences were called on to enact social conflict and then brainstorm possible solutions, some of which resulted in actual legislative change.

We can see the productive confluence of live cinema and activist facilitation techniques, but also role-playing games, in visual anthropologist Maple Razsa and filmmaker Milton Guillén’s 2017 The Maribor Uprisings, a film based on a popular uprising in Slovenia that has audiences simulate the political assemblies at the heart of Razsa’s ethnographic research. Interestingly, to create the facilitation script, the directors enlisted a role-playing game expert and a facilitator for the Black Lives Matter movement (see Razsa, this volume). In place of a passive audience absorbing a spectacle, the event provoked a talking-with others about analogous experiences of protest, rather than a talking-to the anthropological expert about the specific research. The original ethnographic work was in a sense “allegorized,” turned into a source text for the creation of new stories as participants recounted their related experiences and dilemmas.

In short, in these cases, rather than the interaction of a solitary user through the interface of a 2D screen with an ethnographic archive, as in early understandings of database narrative, the social encounter as performative event and political intervention emerges as both a potential venue and product of ethnographic data-stories. It is becoming increasingly clear, though, that to stage this kind of ethnographic experiment, a confluence of skills, knowledges and sensitivities are required. If we are to develop this model, we need to learn how to build interdisciplinary teams of researchers, activists, artists, filmmakers, curators, actors and interested members of the public.
Anthropologist as producer

We were huddled close, in a hushed pre-pandemic clutch, coats on, a chipped golden buddha beaming down on us from the days when the space housed a historic Athenian bar and not ViZ- Laboratory for Visual Culture. It was January 2020 and we had just finished hosting Anthrogames, in which art students, anthropologists and whoever happened to see the announcement on social media, played together in this hip, but unheated space. It was the end of the day and the time had come to talk and process.

But how did we get there in the first place? Without going into too much detail, the particular games had been designed as an “experiment,” as part of the Pelion Summer Lab for Cultural Theory and Experimental Humanities that I co-founded and direct. Experiments as we have been developing them in the lab are meant to be public events, spectacles staged as experiments that, theoretically at least, could be replicated. These games had first been played at an event in the summer of 2019 in a Greek village. After seeing posts about it on social media, a curator in Athens working on an “exhibition-research” project on gaming contacted me to see if the participants wanted to (re)present/perform the games in her gallery. A flood at her gallery, led us to this experimental space run through one of the studios at the Athens School of Fine Arts.

Several months after Anthrogames, the artistic director of the project told me he was putting together a book about all the collaborations that had been staged at his lab, and he wanted me to write a short piece. My first thought was that I had nothing to say. The games had been designed entirely by the participants in the summer lab. I had been careful at every step to make sure their work was credited. But then I started to think about all I had done: choosing the lab theme, inviting faculty, writing the texts on the site, having the idea that the experiment would be a game in the first place, writing the call for participants and, together with my collaborators, deciding on options for lodging and food, organizing special events and the party on the last night. In terms of the games’ afterlife, I was the one who communicated the project to the curators, toured the spaces and thought out how the games could be re-performed. On the day of the event: after lugging the video equipment to the site, taking and uploading photos to our Facebook page, chatting with strangers and encouraging them to play the different games and even giving a small theoretical presentation at the day’s end, I definitely was too exhausted to say I did not “do something.”

Increasingly, I have come to realize that that something is being a producer. Given how complex these kinds of events have become both in their material instantiation and media infrastructure, much of what I described should not be considered part of the job description of an academic anthropologist with a full teaching schedule, nor offloaded onto a precarious graduate student, but rather should be coordinated in tandem with university staff, if available, or remunerated professionals in cultural management. However, I also do reject the elitist view that academic labor is superior to the practical matters involved in hosting. To the contrary, there are critical ethical, pedagogical and political dimensions involved in producing meaningful encounters. The very act of invitation, for instance, is key to building publics that go beyond established communities and networks. Thinking deeply about the participants’ sense of bodily and social comfort in the space and planning for it also is not incidental, but an act of care that establishes an ethic of mutual respect. Crafting possible “points of entry” to this public interface for people of different ages and backgrounds, as well as gauging the politics of the place, context and participants, is nothing less than theory in action. In turn, cultivating a space of conviviality, hospitality and pleasure
can enable participants who come from academic backgrounds to follow their “desire lines” and feel free to “play” outside prescribed categories of action, behavior and thinking (Nolas and Varvantakis 2019, p. 139) (Fig. 6). While it might seem obvious that mixing intense seminars, mountain walks, dance parties and beach time—the approach at our summer lab—would be the best way to nurture collaboration and creativity, both the very positive and very negative reactions to our program suggest to me that this approach is hardly the norm.

Arguably, anthropology is coming late to what artists have been doing since the 1970s and 1980s in the community arts movement and later under the rubric of “relational aesthetics” (Bourriaud, 2002). Rather than exhibit conventional art objects to viewers, artists attempt to engage audiences in situations sparking their participation in order to produce new relations and even research through collective experience and collaborative action. The work thus produced is not a commodifiable art object, but the ongoing project itself in which the audience is repositioned as participant and coproducer. Similarly, post-
ethnography displaces the monograph/article as a closed work, material object and source of symbolic capital for the author in favor of open-ended projects that engage communities and current political concerns. If artists have had to think more deeply about the human in social context—the relational part, anthropologists are being asked to think more rigorously

Figure 6 In preparation for designing a serious/critical game, Pelion Summer Lab participants play Anti-Monopoly with George Mantzios. Mavrinita, August 2019. Photo by Penelope Papailias.
about aesthetics, performance and the experiential: what we might call the “aesthetics of relationality.”

A critical insight of public humanities is that the “public is formed in response to a spectacle, as performance theory makes clear; it is not a pre-constituted body with a general will to see a show” (Sommer, 2014, p. 25). Public anthropology from this vantage point is not about reaching more people, who comprise a hypothetically preexisting public, with our completed scholarship packaged in a more palatable format, such as a game and podcast. Rather, what is at stake is creating a situation that can engage different kind of publics in intense encounters that are both small-scale and high-contact.

The confestival (conference + festival) is one such potential space of encounter. As a film festival for the 21st century database/social media era, the confestival can infuse a conference event with the buzz and youthful energy associated with film and music festivals. If there is one thing I learned from the Data- Stories Confestival (Papailias 2021), it is that to unlearn the conference format, itself very much tied to print culture, based on reading written papers out loud to peers as an intermediate stage to publishing them, we need to implant data-story type events, such as games, workshops and live participant screenings, at their core. Conversely, such formats require this sort of context to “run”: without players there is no game. Indeed, the very idea of the Data- Stories Confestival developed out of the desire to create a venue for undergraduates in my Digital Storytelling and Multimedia Ethnography course to present their original database social media ethnographies. In this example alone, we see how the data-story format pushes us to challenge hierarchies regarding who is sanctioned to speak and present in academic public space based on their “level” of studies.

If a discussion of the performative aspect of post-ethnography foregrounds embodiment, that of production highlights emplacement. In my experience leaving the space of the university and meeting non-academic members of the community half-way destabilizes expectations in a constructive way (Fig. 7). Members of the academic community have to establish their relevance independent of that which is endowed automatically by university buildings, titles and protocols. Meanwhile, those not part of the small circle of people who follow academic events are more likely to have their interest piqued and venture into an intriguing, but potentially unsettling, encounter in such a setting. Sites such as cafés and movie theaters are examples of spaces in the public sphere that could be repurposed for post-ethnographic experiments.

4 The term “confestival” was coined by Data- Stories program director Constantinos Diamantis, who used his background in organizing music and ethnographic film festivals to interrupt the academic conference format. Of course, northern European events such as the Berlin-based transmediale festival of art and digital culture, begun in 1988, and the CTM Festival and Platform for Adventurous Music & Art, founded in 1999, have long experimented with combining academic talks and “discourse” with musical, video and other artistic experimentation. These particular initiatives though begin from the arts and open toward the academy.
Figure 7. Poster for a public discussion about the brutal September 2018 murder of HIV and gay rights activist and drag queen Zak Kostopoulos/Zackie Oh organized in December 2018 in a café in Volos by University of Thessaly students. Designed by Aria Ridou.
A good example is the death café format popular in U.K and the U.S. In its original iterations, these ad hoc gatherings of strangers encourage discussion of the topic of death, usually taboo in everyday conversation, over a cup of coffee or tea. In my Anthropology of Death class, we introduced an anthropological spin to this form. We found that in this space of public intimacy, we could introduce our research and theoretical questions in an organic way, connecting the participants’ personal experiences of death and community knowledge to broader social and technological developments, unfamiliar cultural practices and ethical and political issues around the death of the Other. Of the many events I have produced in the small Greek city where the university in which I teach is located, this one drew the most diverse cross-section of the university and local communities. We had to turn many people away. It turned out to be a surprisingly provocative gesture to (re)inhabit such a familiar social space, borrowing elements of its modes of contact and sociality, but also subverting them by opening up a conversation of this kind among strangers. At the same time, for the students, the experience of blurring the boundaries of classroom and the “real world” and hierarchies of expertise was energizing. A memorable moment occurred when a first-year student who had not yet done a presentation in his university courses stepped forward to field a sensitive and complex question, confidently addressing the rapt group that had convened at the café that evening.

**Ethnography as intervention**

I can imagine several critiques to what I have laid out here. For one, that these informal, but highly theorized and carefully planned events, workshops and performances ultimately will not be legible as “works” within academia and, thus, remain the province of the professionally secure or the relentlessly committed. On the other hand, one might also imagine that the neoliberal academy might actually be enthusiastic about these actions seeing in them a way to please students and improve its public image. Shedding our more clearly demarcated disciplinary identities could risk becoming “everything to everyone”: an unsustainable situation for those already engaged in such practices, which could easily enforce gendered and age-based hierarchies of care work and technical support vs. theory and high scholarship. These kinds of endeavors also might be unfeasible for others without these kinds of interests and skills. Furthermore, anyone who has been involved in such experiments knows that enlisting participants in coproduction and collaboration can be fraught. Issues of textual ownership, authorship and the pressure for credits and credentials will rear their heads no matter the ideological positions we espouse and thus need to be addressed up front.

Indeed, these kinds of ethnographic experiments often are better appreciated—and supported—outside academia by cultural institutions looking for political and social content for their programming. An opening in this direction can be mutually beneficial, but it can also be fraught by a sense of being co-opted and collaterally associated with the agendas and funding genealogies of those institutions. Locating one’s work within such a setting can blunt its political and social objective and lead to the watering down of its academic content as the output must remain to a certain extent “entertaining.” The social turn in art has been critiqued within the art world for its ethical pretensions and overstated emancipatory potential (Bishop, 2012). One could imagine a similar line of critique emerging for ethnographic productions if they lose their unpredictability, fallibility and political groundedness as interventions: if they become systematized and codified as “best practices.”
While these are all legitimate hesitations, in my experience, the enthusiastic uptake of these experiments, the transformative collaborative exchange I have witnessed among researchers, artists, activists and members of the public, but also importantly among different levels of students and faculty, as well as the creative and critical outpouring they have sparked, leaves me both optimistic and determined to continue along this route. I hope it is clear that I am not advocating giving up research and writing essays, articles and, yes, books. Rather I have sought to describe the complementary roles of anthropological curator, performer and producer in order to give them a visibility and legitimacy that could be useful in making them “count” as an anthropological kind of work—and not just in the metrics of university evaluations. Forgoing the kudos of authorship to cultivate synergies is not necessarily easy for those who have been used to seeing themselves in and through their writings. I have insisted here in situating the emergence of the curator-performer-producer roles in relation to historical transformations in ethnographic knowledge production and dissemination in the context of broader media ecologies and knowledge economies. I suggested that actively seeking out new formats is instrumental to exposing and abolishing the Book’s legacy as a cornerstone of the white imperial university and working toward the goal of an engaged scholarship. While what I have described might push some of us, myself included, out of our comfort zones in terms of our training and innate abilities, the political imperative to make social research a potent tool of public intervention might demand taking such risks.
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