THE LEGACIES OF WRITING CULTURE AND THE NEAR FUTURE OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC FORM: A Sketch

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TWO OPENING TABLEAUS . . .

The writing culture “moment” really began for me with the arrival of a visitor to our department at Rice in 1980 (we were collectively discussing, I recall, orality and writing in the production of ethnography), with his (Harvard book) bag full of books . . . The visitor was James Clifford, and he presented an early version of his paper, “On Ethnographic Authority,” as he passed around valuables—exemplars (I recall most memorably, Jeanne Favret-Saada’s *Deadly Words* [1980])—of what was to become the reflexive turn of experiment and all of its variants in “writing culture.”

[What is the equivalent of such a bag of books in thinking about legacies of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) today?]

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An exchange of endorsements. . . . A particular kind of exchange of “The Gift” that defines and entwines scholarly careers:¹

The “Late Editions” project (eight annuals, edited by me, and published by the University of Chicago Press, 1992–2000) was one major preoccupation of mine in the decade—which happened to be the fin de siècle—following the publication of *Writing Culture* and the subsequent debates that it stimulated. I understand this as a bridge project between the challenge to documentary representation raised by the *Writing Culture* critique and current experiments with forms alongside and
within contemporary ethnographic process to be introduced in this retrospective sketch . . .

On the back of the first volume in the Late Editions series, Perilous States: Conversations On Culture, Politics, and Nation, 1993:

Who better than George Marcus to steer the ghost-ship of anthropology, the perennially stimulating child of colonialism, into the mists of fin-de-siècle? Now anthropology-as-cultural-critique finds it true medium in a new world order of collapsed socialisms, wild capitalisms, planetary warlordism, and radical redefinition of female and male, white and colored. Combining the shock of ethnographic method with the nomadology of the guerrilla writer, this new and collective venture, neither book, nor journal, promises to be the format actively equal to this moment in history. —Michael Taussig

[wow, what has changed? As Taussig says, Late Editions was neither book nor journal. Then what? What sort of format? What sort of form? Equal to this moment of history? An always premature question then. It is less so now.]

In the same year of publication, 1993, I commented on the back cover of what has become one of Mick Taussig’s most influential and enduring books, Mimesis and Alterity: a Particular History of the Senses:

What is so strategic and crucial about this work is that it redeems mimesis from its association with naïve ideas about representation once dominant in the social sciences. In so doing, it creates a strong and very necessary challenge to the alternative idea that all of culture is constructed in discourse—the theoretical workhorse of the fashionable cultural studies movement that is now threatening to reach a level of saturation and predictability. Taussig’s deeply informed anthropological readings present us with a contemporary cabinet of curiosities that informs the longstanding fascination with the primitive in the constitution of the modern, and shocks us, in the spirit of Benjamin, into reconsidering what we thought we had largely dismissed in our concerns with the politics of representation.

[In 1993, Taussig was using mimesis already to push beyond the fieldwork–ethnography complex—to evoke what could be written about but not represented]

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Writing Culture was an ambitious and much needed critique of anthropology by means of literary therapy applied to its primary genre form. Issues of politics, the
claims of anthropological knowledge, and what exactly is transacted in fieldwork all
became matters of experiment with a rather modest textual form that became richly
overburdened for a time, and then settled into new conventions that accommodated
rhetorics of argument, “doing” theory, and a general so-called “reflexive turn.”
This legacy of experimenting with forms has now shifted to and blended with
contemporary challenges to constituting still mostly individualistic projects of
ethnographic research in a more globally organized or, rather, arranged, world in
which fieldwork must be constituted other than locally. Far from being matters
of new method, about which anthropologists have been famously implicit and
unspecific, these challenges are once again about the forms of knowledge but have
now shifted from texts as reports from the field to the production of media (web
texts, forms of collaborative thinking, articulations, concept work amid data, or
as data) within, or alongside, the field, as the latter has changed its character
(Faubion and Marcus 2009)—and modes of making them accessible to multiple
constituencies, including the professional one. Although the latter trend might
be seen as mainly a result of the spread of new information technologies—the
vaunted digital revolution—it would be a mistake, without underestimating at
all their significance, to miss the continuity of Writing Culture’s concerns with
critique through experiments with (discursive) forms in the same impulses today
to find ways, media, and modes that mesh ethnographic discourse itself within
anthropology’s reinventions of fieldwork as a process of inquiry.

So, in this reidentification of the concerns of Writing Culture in the present, I
want to identify two tendencies:

1. There are shifts in the forms of scholarly communication or at least in
the ecology of the present expansion of digital possibilities and how these
are affecting the ethnographic genre of research and writing: the book
remains important, of course, to ethnography, but in a different ecology
which favors “commons” of various sorts. Chris Kelty (2009) has written
about this as the function of composition as a key form of ethnographic
process based on its collaborative, collective grounds (drawn from the
practices of crowd sourcing, open source and access, and the formation of
recursive publics). What does the book or its related productions (e.g.,
the scholarly article) out of the ethnographic process become within this
ecology? Some of the exemplars of new forms that I will mention arise as
a function of trying to situate ethnographic research today in this ecology
and developing embedded, accessible expressions of it in process.
2. And to certain degrees, there has been an involution of form in the writing
of ethnographic accounts, a certain settling in of theoretical influences
as dictating writing practices—and leading to a mannerist, or even a
baroque form (Marcus 2007). Notable ethnographic accounts are often
marked by tendencies of excess in descriptive and theoretical ardor, and a
desire to surprise by tropes of unusual juxtaposition. Less baroque forms
of ethnography must find their richness, I argue, outside now established
theoretical traditions of critical ethnographic writing, and the appeal of
alternative forms of articulating thinking, ideas, and concepts inside or
alongside the challenge of situating and managing the fieldwork process—in “third spaces,” archives, studios, labs, “para-sites” and the like—is just
that.

The discursive thinking produced in these forms along the way of fieldwork is not
especially antitheoretical, or overly pragmatist, but foremost open and sensitive to
found perspectives as sources of its own ideas, and its own language of commitment
to argument or critique. The use of critical cultural theories from the 1980s and
1990s is a means of creating an often-ancillary apparatus for a kind of found and
direct concept work in designed spaces of experiment and intervention alongside
the valued serendipity of fieldwork’s movements and circuits (these could be, e.g.,
studios, installations, workshops, or simply seminars as, or lateral, to fieldwork). Most acutely, the ethnographic process becomes transitive and recursive, in addition
to being already deeply reflexive. Writing culture within this process moves from
the field notebook (in anticipation of the eventual text) to certain accessible, if not
public, forms of concept work and critique in the protracted, phased segments of
many fieldwork projects today. It is experiments and attempts at these kinds of
forms that I have been especially interested to examine today as a legacy of 1980s
writing culture debates in their displacement within the terrain of anthropological
inquiry that is conventionally categorized as “method.”

UCI

After the 1980s writing culture debates that put in play a paradigm of cri-
tique for anthropological research—from, say, the early to mid-1990s onward—
anthropology in the United States had then to rethink itself, as did a number of
other disciplines, in relation to the perception and reality of macro social changes
that went under the rubric of globalization. As a discipline, it had to work through
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knowledge economies, global projects of political economy, assemblages, or circulations to find its way to both its traditional and new subjects at the ethnographic scale (face-to-face, everyday) in which it is committed to work. This task was more than just recontextualizing or renarrating the scenes or locations where ethnography could be done. It meant literally moving in scapes or flows, reinventing the concept of the field, reproblematizing the traditional object of study, and exploring new ones. This collective thinking was reflected at the time by a spate of resonant “trend” writing (in U.S. anthropology, works such as Appadurai 1996; Tsing 2000; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; and Marcus 1995, among several others) about the recalibration of the scale and meaning of the basic tropes of anthropological research method so as to set them in motion.

The diverse and fascinating ways that the trends envisioned in the 1990s as the challenge of globalization to the previously more circumscribed ways of conceiving projects of ethnography have played out through the first decade of this century—and continuing—as problems of designing fieldwork and its practices in, through, and between complex institutional orders (e.g., Ong and Collier 2005 is, for me, an iconic text, among others like it, of the ethos of ethnographic research during this period). Conditions for ethnographic research glimpsed or evoked in the 1990s are now full throttle trends of research practice, to be examined as experimental moves or improvisations project by project, as they are reported in ethnographic writing still dominated by critical theory, as they are evoked in the shifting terms of “tales of the field”—the particular kind of shop talk in which anthropologists like to indulge about their tradecraft, as they are taught in graduate mentoring, and most importantly, as they are reflected in the alternative media and forms, notably collaborative, through which access to both fieldwork and its results in development is made available.

In broad brush, I am particularly interested in projects that have to work through complex knowledge economies to shape their own anthropologically conceived objects of study, projects in which the balance has shifted from previously marked epistemological interest in defining ethnographic research questions by the intense examination of anthropologist–other intersubjectivity to a marked ontological interest in the problem of conceiving complex objects of study (in this, anthropology’s participation in science studies has been crucial in conditioning it more generally to working through knowledge economies to sites of everyday life [see, esp., Fischer 2003, 2009]). And commensurately, the reflexive turn, instilled by 1980s critiques of ethnographic writing, has been overshadowed by a transitive (or alternatively, recursive) turn. Anthropologists move in circuits, assemblages, or
among relations—as working metaphors for defining the field—and they move situated discourses that they accumulate around with them in unusual configurations. This movement and posing of arguments out of the places where they are usually made, heard, and reacted to, are distinctive acts of ethnographic fieldwork that are political, normative, and sometimes provocative in nature and deserve their own designed modalities accessible to readerships, audiences, and constituencies who consume ethnography as a form of knowledge. In this sense, indeed, ethnography has routinely become “circumstantially activist” (Marcus 1995), not so much as a contingent effect of the unfolding of research as multisited but, rather, as central to its strategies of asking and pursuing questions among its constituencies, including and encompassing, activists, social movements, jurists, humanitarian interventions, international organizations, and for that matter, corporations, agencies, and labs as well, but always in the name of a distinctive tradition and form of disciplinary knowledge.

The visions and tropes of the 90s have thus become plans, designs, and technologies for giving form to fieldwork in the present. The classic ethnographic textual form—even as amended since the 1980s, and given its learned pleasures—is a very partial and increasingly inadequate means of composing the movements and contests of fieldwork—both naturalistic and contrived, collaborative and individualistic—that motivate it, and on which it is intended to report. The alternative are middle range forms of collaborative articulations in the course of inquiry that need, in turn, trials and experiment under the mantle of disciplinary recognition and authority that anthropology has to confer on the research that it engenders.

These developments are indeed underway, and my own vantage point to explore them is from within the Center for Ethnography that since its founding at the University of California, Irvine in 2005 (www.ethnography.uci.edu) has been interested in studying the conditions of contemporary challenge to and enhancement of common understandings in disciplines (not just anthropology) that promote and value ethnographic inquiry, say, for example, at the time of the 1980s Writing Culture critique, as well as before and after, in the unfolding of projects of ethnographic research, whether pursued as the initiatory pedagogical dissertation project or as successive later projects in maturing research careers.

The following are six conditions that shape ethnographic projects today and to which the Center has paid special attention. In my own view, such conditions are significant in encouraging experimentation with the discursive forms of collaborative thinking enmeshed within or alongside the pursuit of still largely individualistically conceived projects of fieldwork.
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One: Most Prominently, the Imperative and Impulse to Collaborate

Collaboration has always been an engrained dimension of fieldwork, more or less recognized. But today it is also an explicit ideology of and pervasive form for doing all sorts of business—scientific, corporate, infrastructural, and so forth. It is this imperative to collaborate built into sites and situations of ethnographic research that affects its deeply individualistic mode of production and stimulates it to revise its ethos of participant-observation toward forms of explicit but ambiguous collaborations, sometimes compelled, sometimes entered into as ethnographic strategy or opportunity. Collaboration is now doctrine in the worlds in which anthropologists move and creations of alternative forms alongside and within fieldwork are in part explicit adaptations to this condition of doing research, and in part, much needed elaborations of the collaborative impulse that has always been in fieldwork projects. Collaboration is thus both a constraint in working through contemporary knowledge economies to topics, approaches, and attention to data that are distinctively anthropological in character, and a desire of a research tradition that has long had restrained collaborative impulses. This makes any set of working collaborative relations cutting across sites of fieldwork highly political and a challenge to traditional conceptions of the ethics of research.

Two: Double Agency

Anthropology’s thriving, distinctive culture of research, composed of a cluster of informal practices and standards, has an uncertain, often ill-fitting relationship to the demands and analytic languages-in-use of the larger institutional structures and ecologies of research in terms of which it must define and shape itself, for the sake of such quite tangible “goods” as research funding and disciplinary recognition, and of public and academic conversations in which anthropology would like to count as participating. Its deeply regulative norms often conflict with the larger contexts in which it must be successful as a contemporary knowledge-producing discipline. At least part of the solidarity and identity of anthropologists today is based on a premise of their own disciplinary “cultural intimacy” (see Herzfeld 2004), a shared understanding that they are playing a game of doubleness, or fancifully of double-agent-cy, on the level of individual research project design and development. There is a sense of producing research for both “us” and “them” at the same time, in different registers. Every exploration of an alternative form, evoked in this sketch, is also a productive and more explicit exploration of this condition of double agency within or alongside the scenes of fieldwork as they unfold.
Three: Reception and Granular Publics within the Frames of Fieldwork

The widespread call, at least in U.S. anthropology, for a public anthropology signals the intense interest of anthropologists in the responses to their work by the publics (or commons) of varying composition and scale that it is able to touch. These responses seem to matter more to many anthropologists, at least affectively, than professional responses to their work. Some of the alternative forms in and alongside fieldwork that I am surveying accommodate this desire, and define challenges of design that address it. How can this interest in reception—as engagement with constituencies while the research is in progress as an integral dimension of it—become a granular dimension of the scale and process of a fieldwork project? This is not just a question of what the subjects think of what the anthropologist has written about them, but how diverse responses to a project as it develops become part of its integral data sets, and then the basis for professional reception and assessment of their own products of knowledge by anthropologists themselves in a double, dialogical process by which the results in progress of anthropological inquiry are both public and authoritative knowledge. Folding receptions into anthropological research through alternative forms, such as the studio, the para-site, or the dynamic archive, responds to, and “passes” for as well, a kind of operative imperative, like that to collaborate, in neoliberal institutional arrangements and projects, to provide voice for “stakeholders.” But in the studio or para-site contexts of ethnography, this accommodation of reception in research agendas themselves plays into anthropology’s own longer-standing critical rationales and commitments. All of the forms that I evoke below explicitly define publics or constituencies as a dimension of fieldwork itself.

Four: Incompleteness and Scale

Ethnographies never have delivered literal holistic accounts of any of the social scales that they have represented, but the research that has produced ethnographies has been undertaken with satisfactory (or satisfying) imaginaries of the broader social systemic contexts in which it operates (even doctrines of “partial knowledge” provide, by deferred imagination, this systemic context for the intimate scale of ethnography [see Otto and Bubandt 2011]). How to evoke and understand broader scales in ethnographic research projects became more problematic during the 1990s—not so much in the rhetoric of ethnographic writing but in the planning and doing of ethnographic research—with multiple discussions of “the global situation,” on the one hand, and, on the other hand, with the weighted shift from
epistemological to ontological concerns in several important arenas of ethnographic research (e.g., sciences studies, political economy, development). With the failure or weakening of holistic systems rhetorics that assist the defining of sites or circuits of ethnographic research, incompleteness becomes a methodological postulate, even a theorem. How a project in its intensive doing is incomplete not only becomes an interesting question in itself but also a probe with which to establish paraethnographic connection with research subjects or counterparts who perhaps share an affinity with the ethnographer based on a dimension of variable speculation about agencies elsewhere, and an encompassing, contextualizing systemic scale (I once conceived these relations of research as based on complicity, rather than rapport [Marcus 1997]). In any case, a speculative imaginary of an ethnographic sort for how the everydayness of one’s inquiry relates to the unseen everydayness of connected elsewhere becomes an important dimension of fieldwork that is motivated to create alternative forms to probe with others in the circuits of fieldwork this “theorem” of incompleteness within or alongside many ethnographic projects today.

Five: The Temporality of Emergence

Working on and in the temporality of emergence, of the contemporary (as the just past and the near future) defines as much, if not more, the mise-en-scène of many ethnographic projects today than the traditional distinctive space or site, with a definable past and a captured present. The present becoming the near future at least shapes a common orientation of ethnographer and her subjects, and provides the negotiable basis of mutual concept work—a shared, baseline imaginary for it—on which the collaborative experiments with form that I am evoking depend. Orientation to the emergent present thus produces the aesthetic satisfaction of surprise that in part drives ethnographic inquiry, but also connects with the parallel aesthetics found among the intellectually more active of ethnography’s subjects, as interlocutors and epistemic partners in research.

Kim Fortun in her article for this issue conceives of this distinctive temporality of ethnographic research in the contemporary as the “future anterior”:

Ethnography . . . can be designed to bring forth a future anterior that is not calculable from what we now know, a future that surprises. Ethnography thus becomes creative, producing something that didn’t exist before. Something beyond codified expert formulas. . . . The future is anteriorized when the past is folded into the way reality presents itself, setting up both the structures and the obligations of the future . . . . Toxics, like the future anterior, call on
us to think about determinism but without the straightforward directives of teleology. [this issue]

The temporality of emergence is thus a condition of the research situation and a feature of the material—the data, as such—that ethnography collects, but more significantly, it is a component of the ways of thinking and analysis that the ethnographer and her subjects try out on each other as fieldwork proceeds. Eventually, this temporality finds itself as a framing and analytic language in the writing of ethnographic texts, but much before that, it is a key dimension of the way concepts and thinking emerge collaboratively and speculatively in the field.

Six: The Appeal of Design and the Studio as a Legitimate Form of Experimentation in Association with Fieldwork Projects

Design practices have had great appeal in recent years across a number of practices in the human sciences that were reshaped by critical culture theories during the 1980s and 1990s, especially. Bruno Latour has attractively dubbed design as “the cautious prometheus” (2008)—evoking a kind of pragmatic, small-scaled ethos and plan for the critical scholar as researcher with activist inflection in an era of phlegmatic left–liberal political imaginaries. Design thus has within it associations with critique and critical practices, yet thrives in formal relation to markets and commerce. Optimistically, the appropriation of design methods, then, might give ethnography (to which designers have been drawn in their need to take users into account and in their own curiosities through “cultural probes”) the affordance of the “mole” in “third spaces.” This may be wishful thinking, but in terms of how fieldwork is conducted, it does offer the concept of the studio and its practices as a material means of experimenting with alternative forms within or alongside the serendipitous movements of ethnographers in fieldwork. The studio captures a micro public—or its representatives—evokes a scaled down commons, or creates a literal space for broad, speculative, and explicit theoretical thinking, and a culturally sensitive means to shape an unruly field or domain of research circulation. It can establish an authority for ethnographic inquiry, building on that existing for the design studio, where that of ethnography itself is more than usually constrained, or barely recognized.^[4]

THIRD SPACES, AND SO FORTH . . .

Michael Fischer influentially posited during the early 2000s that anthropology “now operates in a set of third spaces” in which “anthropology’s challenge is to develop translation and mediation tools for helping make visible the difference
of interests, access, power, needs, desire, and philosophical perspective" (Fischer 2003:3) He goes on to say that “these third spaces are terrains and topologies of analysis of cultural critique of ethical plateaus. They are dramaturgical processes, fields of action and deep plays of reason and emotion, compulsion and desire, meaning making and sensuality, paralogics and deep sense, social action and constraints of overpowering social forces” (Fischer 2003:4).

My sense of the course of many projects of ethnographic research roughly from the turn of the century forward are indeed operating in third spaces, but both of their own making and design, as well as in those “found” and posited. So, what are these third spaces literally, how have they been imagined, and sometimes literally produced, stage managed, or forged out of the circuits and serendipitous movements that fieldwork projects define? For third spaces to be found, must they to some degree not be produced, elicited, as domains of speculative thinking, alongside and increasingly defining of situations of fieldwork? What are the varieties of such moves and inventions? How are they conceived, and what do they portend for anthropological knowledge?

EXEMPLARS . . .

These questions have come to be the intellectual spine—the orienting themes—of the Center for Ethnography at UCI, with a curiosity about the many projects that were then self-consciously emerging at its inauguration (in 2005) and becoming established arenas of anthropological research endeavor amid the networks, assemblages, knowledge economies, and complex institutional arrangements of global orders that had been the prominent subjects of the influential “trend” writing in anthropology during the 1990s that I mentioned, and anthropology’s early forays into sciences studies, as well as fascinations with critiques of neoliberalism, flows, circuits, ethnographic multisitedness, and so forth. Immersive fieldwork certainly has remained the ideology of ethnographic research in these arenas, but its ultimate results, its developing ideas and arguments, are functions of different sorts of participations that pursue a line of thinking in the field, often collaborative and collective in nature, that requires not only documentation (in field notes and diaries, e.g., leading to the monograph) but also forms of elicitation, demonstration, and accessibility to publics and readerships in process. Thus, in contemporary ethnographic projects, prototypes—working versions anticipatory of a result—have become, in a sense, more important productions than finished and rounded interpretative texts. But these productions need their forms, their spaces, their studios, and media. It is the variety of such experiments in form that
the Center has sought to follow, encourage, to provide perspective on, and perhaps use to articulate the rudiments of a theory of such practices.

In terms of digital technology, the website, and its evolving capacities (e.g., the development of content management systems, of text oriented websites, or blogs, like WordPress) to represent, communicate, and create opportunities for participation, has been the working medium for the development and communication of alternative forms embedded in or alongside the research process. The capacity, knowledge, and resources to support digital forms for ethnography are another matter—and challenge. Yet, the following exemplars all make use of such technology at different levels and stages of commitment. Overall, they provide the means of continuing access during the life of a research project to experiments with the ethnographic form whether they are performed through such technology (as in some experiments in dynamic archiving) or through active staged interventions and studio events alongside fieldwork for which digital technology provides a means of continual reporting and engagement in relation to its granular, built publics along the way. What such forms, technologically assisted or not, provide access to is not so much data but the analytics and thinking of a research project in progress. They certainly do not trump as yet the conventional ethnographic text or book. Rather, at this juncture, they can provide an enframing ecology for it. But, as both the performed events as forms and the technologies for discursive access to them develop, they do promise to be more than just supplementary to, or enframing of, the classic modes of writing culture.

In the spirit and limits of this article as a sketch, I merely categorize, with brief descriptions and annotations, a sample of the projects that I have been following. I cite their own self-presenting websites and statements for consultation by the reader as a means of following them in their devised modes of anthropological scholarship that develop continuously and alongside the broader and encompassing projects and knowledge economies through which they constitute their research as fieldwork under the range of contemporary conditions that I described.

I. DYNAMIC ARCHIVING...

Rather than mere repositories of data or accumulated scholarship, archives in the mode of ethnographic experimentation are active, animated, open-ended, multileveled, and transitive in authorings, genres, publics, commons, and internal relations, monitoring the shifting conditions of producing ethnographic research today. They are the most fully alternative among the examplars that I am surveying to the authoritative print genres of scholarly communication. Their conventional
success depends on resources, investments, and patronage of the technologies through which they are created. In this way, they are perhaps no different historically than, say, encyclopedias and cabinets of curiosity when they were in fashion. From the many such projects underway today morphing conventional disciplinary practices, I select out Mike and Kim Fortuns’ Asthma Files project to exhibit. Asthma Files is a work in progress that both illustrates the considerable hurdles in actually producing a platform true to the project’s considerable ambitions and vision, as well as providing a continuing in-depth conceptual, theoretical, and normative discussion of the project’s imaginaries rooted in the ethnographic stuff of the world (see Asthma Files n.d.; Fortun 2011b).

In such projects, not just technological possibility but also curatorial practices become key to the construction, maintenance, and arguments-within-form of dynamic archiving, as contemporary “writing culture.”

II. STUDIOS, LABS, PARA-SITES . . .

Studies and labs established in relation to particular fieldwork projects, collectively or individually pursued, have different durations, compositions, and intellectual styles.

They are often influenced by the working practices of a variety of design disciplines (e.g., architecture, graphics, product design, or design modalities in informatics and computer science, or theater arts and art-making movements like conceptual, performance, and installation art) or natural sciences that combine lab work with fieldwork.

A lab model is the Anthropological Research on the Contemporary ([ARC]; consult anthropos-lab.net), begun in the mid-2000s at Berkeley, and that has gone through a number of changes (see Rabinow 2011). It has evolved a distinctive sense of how collective labwork should develop alongside ongoing ethnographic research projects (the function of “concept work” that it defines for itself), and there are some interesting debates early in its history, and archived on its website, about alternative ways a lab or studio initiative might relate to existing ways of thinking about the conduct of fieldwork (see also Marcus 2008). In its later iterations, ARC reports on specific studio events in relation to particular fieldwork projects in progress.

A studio model is the “para-site” developed from the mid-2000s as well at the Center for Ethnography at UCI as a modality available to “first fieldwork” projects of dissertation research in progress that provides an opportunistic means of untangling certain conceptual or relational “knots” that emerge during or after (in
the postdoc period) such pedagogically monitored research. The scenes for such
events are carefully thought through, designed, and even staged, and depending on
its problems, and its politics, so to speak, brings together different constituencies
to the research, including those in the “field” (informants, subjects, members of its
publics), and those not (e.g., supervising, mentoring professors, fellow students,
relevant experts).

Although the “para-site” concept of studio events alongside or within fieldwork
was thought through originally as a pedagogical modality, it has migrated as well as
an element of thinking about ethnographic projects in maturing careers. However,
para-site, studio interventions were not meant to be part of the design or planning
of fieldwork projects in their early stages but, rather, a resource or form in reserve,
thought through as such and adapted to the conditions of doing ethnography today—
especially with regard to both the imperative and impulse to collaborate, discussed
previously. Para-sites are thus opportunistic, and meant to reduce the abstraction
of the theoretical processing of ethnographic data, by pushing such processing into
staged dialogic occasions of the ethnographic research process.

III. PROJECTS WITHIN (OR ALONGSIDE) PROJECTS . . .

An important category of projects of contemporary ethnographic research that
create conditions for the kind of experimentation with forms, like the studio, lab,
staged or designed intervention, or curated archive that I have been discussing, are
those that are embedded within, and usually funded and given assigned “space” by,
much more powerful, often international, and cross-institutional projects. These
are ethnographic research functions within the leviathan, so to speak, the new
assemblages, arrangements, and animating ideas of governing orders. Actually,
most ethnography today, no matter how local, occurs within or in relation to
such regimes, the reflexive sides of which exercise increasing auditing scrutiny,
its own of variable ethnographic interest (Strathern 2000) of what it sponsors. The
condition of producing ethnography that gives rise to a critical function of the kind
that Writing Culture promoted within the craft of producing ethnographic discourse
(in its textual genre, but now, as I argue, in fieldwork) is that of the sort of
“double-agency” that I mentioned. And these ethnographic projects within larger
patron projects that negotiate different agendas epitomize this condition of double-
agency and perform it, so to speak, in the alongside forms that it produces, spon-
sors, or participates): conferences, studios, seminars, planning meetings, and so
forth.
Two such projects that I have followed with fascination are the Institute for Money, Technology and Financial Inclusion (IMTFI; consult http://www.imtfi.uci.edu/), conceived and directed by my colleague at UCI, Bill Maurer, and funded as a project of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and Paul Rabinow’s term as director of the ELSI (Ethics, Law, Social Implication) component of a multiuniversity, NSF-funded initiative (SynBERC) to establish the emerging field of synthetic biology (see Rabinow 2011; Rabinow and Bennett in press; studio events in relation to this project are on the ARC website subsequent to Rabinow’s controversial exiting of SynBERC). Together, they provide an interesting and revealing comparative probe into projects that align (and contest) the purposes of critical ethnographic inquiry with those of megaprojects that define space and a certain domain of agency for the latter. Both projects define anthropological research and media as a contemporary legacy of writing culture within the clockwork of Weber’s bureaucratic rationality, or of Foucault’s governmentality. They exhibit both the subtleties and the more overt politics of so doing, as well as the alongside experiments with digital, conference, and workshop forms on which a sense of doing fieldwork while participating in the work of larger projects depends.

Envoi

A postmodern ethnography is a cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and thus provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect. It is, in a word, poetry—not in its textual form, but in its return to the original context and function of poetry, which by means of its performative break with everyday speech, evoked memories of the ethos of community and thereby provoked hearers to act ethically.

—Stephen A. Tyler Post-Modern Ethnography

[Fortun 2011a]

ABSTRACT

This article argues that the most lively contemporary legacy of the 1980s Writing Culture critiques now lie outside, or beyond, conventional texts but, rather, in the forms that are integral to fieldwork itself. Fieldwork today requires a kind of collaborative concept work that stimulates studios, archiving, para-sites, which in turn constitute the most innovative expressions of ethnography, difficult to capture in the traditional genre. [archives, collaboration, concept work, para-sites, studios]
NOTES

1. I have thought of doing a sort of memoir—fanciful and with its comedic aspect—of the 80s forward in the form of select book cover endorsements such as these, and arranged to evoke certain relations of production and of reciprocity like this one . . . but more importantly to capture something of the style of post—Writing Culture vainglory. There would be something of value, I argue, in apprehending collectively a portrait of these selected short texts that would augur where we are now with problems of form in ethnographic research more broadly (rather than just in producing ethnography as texts).

2. The task of the Santa Fe seminar from which these essays emerged was to introduce a literary consciousness to ethnographic practice by showing various ways in which ethnographies can be read and written . . . . The question for the anthropologist is, then, how consequential this literary therapy should be—does it merely add a new critical appreciation of ethnography, which one can take or leave in reading and writing ethnographic accounts, or does it clear the way for reconceptualizing anthropological careers and valorizing innovations in strategies for projects that link fieldwork and writing? [Marcus 1986:262]

3. As Marilyn Strathern has said, based on her own forays into complex big science projects, and redemptive of ethnography in those contexts: "Social anthropology has one trick up its sleeve: the deliberate attempt to generate more data than the investigator is aware of at the time of collection" (2004:6). This "more data," this surplus of interpretation and insight—more than subjects, clients, or a broad public perhaps desire or understand—is often the "stuff" that defines the double-agency of fieldwork research. In the alternative, experimental forms emerging today, this "stuff" finds expression and articulations that can morph, travel, and gain constituencies within the operations of fieldwork and beyond. The inevitable position of double-agency today becomes, in studios, para-sites, lateral positionings, the basis for the composition of thinking forged in the field that can travel and articulate more broadly the "trick up anthropology’s sleeve."

4. In evoking design as a kind of ground for the figure of innovation in the emergence of along-side practices, I have been cautioned about overenthusiasm for design practices (e.g., participatory design) and what they in fact do, by anthropologists such as Lucy Suchman (2011) and Melissa Cefkin (2010) who have made their careers in working in regimes of design process. Also, in evoking design as an inspiration, I have sometimes been misunderstood as being mainly interested in how ethnography can work within and aid design and studio projects—a relationship that has long been establishedug. In an alternative, experimental forms emerging today, this "stuff" finds expression and articulations that can morph, travel, and gain constituencies within the operations of fieldwork and beyond. The inevitable position of double-agency today becomes, in studios, para-sites, lateral positionings, the basis for the composition of thinking forged in the field that can travel and articulate more broadly the "trick up anthropology’s sleeve."

5. For example, the Matsutake Worlds Research group, whose website, matsutakeworlds.org, archives a continuing collaborative research endeavor that I have begun to follow as I was writing this article. It has evolved from the influential writing of Anna Tsing in the 1990s and 2000s about doing ethnography in the "Global Situation," to the formation of the Matsutake Worlds Research Group (2009) among her students and associates as a collaborative project in its archival form on line as ethnography in progress.

6. Here is a summary of the project by its creators, drawn from their website:

   The Asthma Files is an experimental, digital ethnography project structured to support collaboration among distributed, diversely focused researchers, and outreach to
diveous audiences. . . . The Asthma Files operates on an open source platform that sup-
ports both the research process, and rapid, creative sharing of research results. As the
project matures, there will be active outreach to various audiences, including scien-
tists, health care providers, journalists, policy makers and people with asthma. . . . The
Asthma Files maintains a continually expanding and evolving list of reasons the project
is important. This list, in the substantive logics drawer of the archive, keeps all in-
volved mindful of the historical conditions in which we work, and of the challenge
of linking academic research in the social sciences and humanities to contemporary
social problems. The Asthma Files also maintains a continually evolving list of design
logics that shape how the research is imagined, carried out and represented. These
logics are drawn from social, literary, and aesthetic theory. Curating a list of de-
sign logics allows theoretical ideas to animate without overdetermining The Asthma
Files. —Mike and Kim Fortun [Asthma Files n.d.]

7. The ethnocharrette is another variant on the studio event, besides the para-site, that is being
developed, by Keith Murphy and myself, at the Center for Ethnography at UCI, specifically
as a pedagogical modality for thinking through and remaking published ethnographies as pro-
totypes for other forms and formats. For reports on our first two ethnocharrettes, consult
http://ethnocharrette.wordpress.com/.

8. Theatricality is an interesting source of stimulation in thinking about the conduct of para-sites,
brieﬂy explored in Deeb and Marcus 2010.

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THE LEGACIES OF WRITING CULTURE AND THE NEAR FUTURE OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC FORM

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Taussig, Michael

Tsing, Anna

Tyler, Stephen A.