

# MULTIMODAL ANTHROPOLOGIES

## Multimodality: An Invitation

Samuel Gerald Collins, Matthew Durington, and Harjant Gill  
*Associate Editors for Multimodal Anthropologies*  
 Towson University

This section used to be called Visual Anthropology. Its new name—Multimodal Anthropologies—reflects changes in the media ecologies we engage as anthropologists, changes that have broadened our perspective to include other forms of media practice, while remaining inclusive of visual anthropology. Many of these changes can be linked to three developments: (1) the (relative) democratization and integration of media production; (2) the shift toward engagement and collaboration in anthropological research; and (3) the dynamic roles of anthropologists vis-à-vis both the profession and the communities in which they work. Together, these changes suggest a new framework, multimodal anthropology, by which we mean not only an anthropology that works across multiple media but one that also engages in public anthropology and collaborative anthropology through a field of differentially linked media platforms. This is not, however, a decisive “break” with the past. Many of us already practice multimodal anthropology (Collins and Durlington 2014; Cool 2014; Edwards 1997; Pink 2011; Postill 2011; Stewart 2013). When we consider the different opportunities and possibilities for engaging with ethnographically intended media in the age of diverse tools and platforms, we see multimodal anthropology. When we look at the transmedia installations of Ethnographic Terminalia, we see articulations of multimodal anthropology. Multimodal anthropology is also encapsulated within the numerous visual, aural, and tactile media that anthropologists produce, post, and share—the growing decoupage of social media that is one symptom of a changing anthropological practice. Multimodal practice is not limited to self-identification as a visual anthropologist. Rather, it encompasses this subdiscipline and also invites practitioners from within and outside anthropology. Finally, we see multimodality in the ways communities of non-anthropologists interact with us, from para-anthropological productions to critique and commentary. In what follows, we lay out our vision and ever-expanding areas of interest for this section as we explore the transformative potentialities of the multimodal. It is meant less as a provocation than an invitation to submit works that engage multimodal possibilities.

### PREAMBLE

Multimodality describes the arc of anthropological media through contemporary society. It evokes the heterogeneities of anthropological research across multiple platforms and collaborative sites, including film, photography, dialogue, social media, kinesis, and practice. At its core, multimodal anthropology acknowledges the centrality of media production to the everyday life of both anthropologists and our interlocutors. It demands that we reflect on this multiplicity while working to engage and collaborate along media forms our interlocutors find relevant to their lives. A multimodal approach extends not only to the research anthropologists do leading up to media production but also to the afterlife of anthropologically intended media. It implicates the relationships between anthropologists and networked publics formed through dissemination, as well as the discussions and debates that media engender. Multimodality insists that we look to media practice within our research and scholarship, and simultaneously pay attention to how our work is often mediated through institutions fraught with ethical dilemmas and continuous negotiations. It invites us to explore how contemporary media forms, producers, and communities are embedded in systems of highly unequal capital accumulation.

A multimodal anthropological approach is both descriptive and prescriptive. It characterizes the way people work and conduct research in the contemporary world, and implores us to conceive of anthropological research and scholarship beyond the finished, reified products of fieldwork or labwork: an article, a book, an ethnographic film, a photo essay. Instead, we are encouraged to engage in varying processes of knowledge production that often lead to multiple outcomes. Prescriptively, multimodal anthropology asks that we take these outcomes and processes seriously as meaningful interventions that nudge anthropology into more collaborative, innovative, and reflexive directions. We appreciate outcomes but also look to emphasize the knowledge that comes from recognizing and analyzing the process in getting these outcomes, and to explore varying methodologies in their own right.

Above all, a multimodal anthropology does not attempt—or desire—to supplant visual anthropology. Rather, it seeks to include traditional forms of visual anthropology while simultaneously broadening the purview

of the discipline to engage the variety of media forms that exist today.

### **MULTIMODALITY IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PRACTICE**

On their way to producing anthropological media, anthropologists weave a complex skein of trace media behind them: from social media posts to relationships built with communities; to hastily recorded sound bites and photographs taken to help us remember specific details; to rough cuts and early edits of films; to varied exchanges and quid pro quo arrangements where field researchers produce recordings, photographs, and film at the behest of the community (Jackson 2004). These traces reveal the complexities of how our interlocutors engage with media as well as the processes through which we conduct research and arrive at particular understandings. Previously, materials that did not end up in the final account of our research were relegated to a dusty bookshelf or a forgotten cardboard box somewhere in our offices. In an age of accelerated media proliferation, these networked forms of media are rendered more visible and, paradoxically, at a time when they might seem ephemeral, even more permanent. The trail of shared, collaborative media that our research and practice produces continues as a series of traces that adumbrate the anthropological engagement, a networked archive that twists around the final products of ethnography like snakes along the mythical caduceus. Multimodal anthropology refocuses our attention on these pre- and post-fieldwork encounters, compelling us to follow these complex networks back through the various collaborations and reciprocities that make up engaged anthropology today. While some of these (para)productions might be more quantifiable than others in terms of the value our institutions assign to them, they still connect to our interlocutors in meaningful ways that demand our attention as engaged anthropologists committed to supporting and giving back to communities we represent.

### **MULTIMODALITY THROUGH COLLABORATIVE MEDIA**

The relationships and rapport that develop through anthropological fieldwork were either ignored or minimally addressed in historical anthropology. Perhaps it is the black-and-white photo of the lone anthropologist talking to an informant sidelined to the ephemera of fieldwork practice or the reflexive gesture of a hand reaching from behind the camera to greet that disrupted these vestiges of descriptive anthropology. Disruptions to the intellectual authority of the anthropologist (colonial, Western, racial) were “accidents” of the anthropological engagement. Over time the authority of the anthropologist was rivaled by the recognition of local knowledge production, and the roles of researcher and research subject began to be contested. This can be witnessed through changes in the nomenclature itself as reified “subject” moves to “participant,” “collaborator,” or even “coauthor.” From participatory action research to participatory cinema,

the reflexive engagement and critique of the primary role of the anthropologist have fashioned a different type of methodology and outcome (Gubrium, Harper, and Otanez 2015). Multimodality necessitates and demands a revelation of the collaborative nature of anthropology and informs the various media produced through these encounters. New forms of media shared through various networks such as social media would not even exist without collaboration. Therefore, to overlook the collaborative nature of anthropological work would be misrecognition of multimodal anthropology.

The inclusion of reflexivity in anthropological practice is one way to recognize the collaborative nature of anthropological media (Ruby 1982). The creation of anthropological media—a photograph, film, or text—involves ideological closure, where the institutions and relations that overdetermine the production of media are obscured by the text as an ideological artifact. Occasionally, over the decades, scholars have (sometimes heroically) regrafted these ideological processes in moments of reflexivity. But these moments of transparency are *ex post facto* and bear their own ideological weight amidst a postmodernism that looks both like a break and a continuation of the status quo. Foregrounding the collaborative nature and ethos of anthropological work disrupts overdetermination.

### **EDUCATING ANTHROPOLOGISTS IN MULTIMODALITY**

Students learning anthropology arrive in our classrooms already proficient in the language of media. For most, engaging and collaborating through media comes almost as second nature. In times past, they have learned to “cut the network” (Strathern 1996) through published works assigned to them that may have arisen through collaborative processes, but are presented typically as single-authored texts, films, or photographs. A multimodal approach to teaching anthropological research methods demands that we highlight anthropology as a “work in progress” that traverses multiple, collaborative platforms. While the conventional educational experience will undoubtedly continue to privilege finished, edited media, a multimodal approach to learning demands that our students think through the politics and vicissitudes of indigenous media and social media, gallery shows, performances, designs, apps, games, makerspaces, diagrams, and prototypes, in addition to sites of para-anthropology negotiated on a variety of platforms. These too are components of anthropological methods in a multimodal age. On one level this call for expansion of anthropological curricula might seem like an ambitious undertaking. Yet multimodality is only about recognizing the ever-present “messiness” of the anthropological encounter, with the acknowledgment that much of this complexity is rendered more and more transparent through the ubiquity of media practices. It demonstrates that the anthropological field site and the work of anthropology itself is never static or ossified, but is constantly subject to change. As a pedagogical intervention, multimodal anthropology asks students to reflect on media ecologies in

which they are already imbricated, and challenges them to engage these forms and practices in innovative ways without compromising our ethical responsibilities toward our interlocutors and the communities we represent.

### EMERGENT MULTIMODALITIES

The framework of multimodal anthropology also keeps open a space for other forms of media engagements that will emerge in the near future, with the understanding that some of the multimodal media we now practice will be rendered obsolete. It elides the critique of technological determinism by allowing a constant space for new technologies and modes of dissemination to be recognized and welcomed by necessity. Given the accelerations of transnational capitalism, media platforms supplant each other with a dizzying rapidity that seems designed to undermine critique in the age of spectacle. But this is synecdoche for anthropology as a whole, with its discourse continually threatened with either absorption into the capitalist image machine or insouciance from public discourse. Here, the exposure of multimodality to the vicissitudes of capital accumulation, commodification, transnational circulation, and spectacle serves to critically locate the anthropological enterprise within a political-economic apparatus that the discipline as a whole has paid scant attention to.

A multimodal approach demands that we consider the ways in which current media practices are embedded in global systems of inequality. One of the exciting (albeit unintended) consequences of new media for multimodality is that the negotiations around media-related practices in anthropology, the uncertainties, and the processes of dialogue and exchange are more visible on every level. In other words, all of the traces of anthropological research that fall outside of finished media come racing back—the return of what is repressed in anthropological research. Similarly, future media will reveal new forms of exploitation and, inevitably, new challenges for anthropologists. Each of these new challenges will undoubtedly generate new spaces for reflection and critique. Just as moves toward open access and Creative Commons licensing have generated new questions about the ethics of publishing our work behind paywalls, so will future media precipitate new and unknown perspectives on inequalities latent in the anthropological encounter.

### MULTIMODAL SCHOLARSHIP CIRCULATION

A multimodal approach to anthropological research and scholarship also demands the questioning and inevitable decentering of the hierarchies of scholarly production, within which book-length monographs, journal articles, and (more recently) feature-length ethnographic films have been privileged. A commitment to a multimodal anthropological future includes the recognition that the flow of ideas and scholarship does not necessarily need to follow the familiar, fairly narrow, and increasingly crowded path to publication that requires us to seek legitimization from high-impact journals, exclusive academic presses, and premier film

festivals. Multimodal anthropology emerges partly out of its practitioners' frustrations with the inability of these limited venues to keep up with innovation and expansion in anthropology, and to adequately reflect the changing landscape and influence of emerging media technologies on anthropologists and our interlocutors' everyday lives. In doing so, the project of multimodal anthropology is also a provocation, encouraging researchers to consider innovative approaches to research, learning, and knowledge production without the anxiety of being dismissed as extraneous or frivolous.

*American Anthropologist's* endorsement of a more multimodal future should be seen as a commitment to the egalitarianizing of scholarly production within our discipline by expanding the disciplinary boundaries to include forms of scholarship that have traditionally struggled to gain a foothold in anthropology. It is commendable that the traditional mechanisms of gatekeeping are now opening up to multimodal possibilities. Such an ambitious endeavor is certain to pose new challenges when it comes to the reviewing and vetting processes we currently have in place to legitimize our research, sanctioned by our discipline and our institutions. In some sense, this concern with legitimization confronting multimodal anthropology is perhaps a greater challenge than the inclusion of diverse perspectives and approaches to research and knowledge production, and there exists no effortless solutions. But a commitment to a multimodal anthropological future also demands a commitment to working through and overcoming these challenges in a synergetic way, coming up with innovative solutions that build on existing strengths of our discipline as well as nudging our institutions toward recognizing the value of a multimodal-inclusive future.

### NEGOTIATING THE TERRAIN OF MULTIMODALITY

What does it mean to be a multimodal academic? For many (if not most) of us, it means that faculty pursue multimodal work “on the side” of their academic productions. This can work if the anthropologist uses multimodal scholarship as a stepping stone toward more conventional forms of scholarly dissemination, but this form of self-censorship also limits the potential of what multimodality can be. For practitioners of visual anthropology, this is a familiar process, with their work only recently gaining academic acceptance in many institutions. Yet the barriers facing multimodal scholarship are even more manifold. Because multimodal anthropology is at its core a challenge to the ideological closure of research into the discrete work of a single author, there are many unresolved dilemmas for anthropology faculty. Perhaps, this is the point.

While anthropologists have yet to grapple with the challenge of a multimodal professorate, other disciplines have begun to reformulate rules of promotion and tenure. The American Sociological Association, for example, has just released a report on social media in academic careers, “What Counts? Evaluating Public Communication in Promotion and Tenure” (McCall et al. 2016), that takes these digital platforms seriously as means of scholarly engagement in their



**FIGURE 1.** A screenshot of the Cards Against Anthropology Twitter page @anthrocards. (Screenshot taken by Matthew Durington) [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

own right. That said, the ASA report confines its discussion to social media as a tool to “disseminate research findings” (4)—in other words, as a proxy for or a supplement to print-based scholarship that is still at the core of promotion and tenure decisions in the academy. This is far too limiting and lacks imagination. If any field has the capacity to engender a multimodal practice and set of productions, it is anthropology. We should be the first to legitimate these notions both as a discipline and practice.

In other words, the ASA report recognizes social media at the cost of ignoring other dimensions of media that enfold our academic work. Consider social media as more than platforms for dissemination. First, social media have become a means of research—forums where research and scholarship are formulated, negotiated, and organized. Second, social media have become sites of collaborative media production, places where media have flowed between anthropologists, interlocutors, and communities. These processes defy the easy assignation of authorship but also suggest a more egalitarian form of knowledge production. Finally, social media (by definition) support forms of dissemination that are simultaneously reproductions through remix, recontextualization, and the secondary production of added media content. That is, media on social media platforms are dynamic and protean in a way that other forms of scholarly dissemination (even those that lay claim to reflexivity) may fail to be.

Rather than resolve into a conventional “genre” of scholarly dissemination, we believe that multimodal platforms will: (1) continue to proliferate through a variety of commercial and noncommercial applications; and (2)

that these developments will continue to call into question definitions of scholarship and will continue to problematize the position of the anthropologist amid complex relations of collaboration, multiple authorship, remixing, and porting across fields of inequality and difference (Kelty 2008).

### EXAMPLES OF MULTIMODALITY IN CURRENT WORK

Multimodal anthropology can come from a variety of places and take many forms. Here are a few that we are working on.

Maybe multimodal anthropology can be a game that challenges the ethics of anthropologists and students of anthropology by co-opting a popular card game (Figure 1).

Perhaps it can be a geolocating mobile app walking tour informed by anthropological fieldwork (Figure 2).

Or we can locate the multimodal within a distribution strategy for an ethnographic film (*Mardistan/Macholand*) that challenges censor boards in India by simultaneously circulating the uncensored versions online on open-access platforms as the censored version is telecasted on Indian national television (Figure 3).

### AN OPEN INVITATION TO JOIN IN AND BE PART OF THE MULTIMODAL MOVEMENT

As we chart this terrain toward a new horizon in anthropology, we hope that you join us and participate in shaping the future for our discipline that we have outlined above. Commitment to multimodality—incorporating multimodal approaches in our research, practice, and dissemination of our scholarship—does not necessitate the acquisition of an

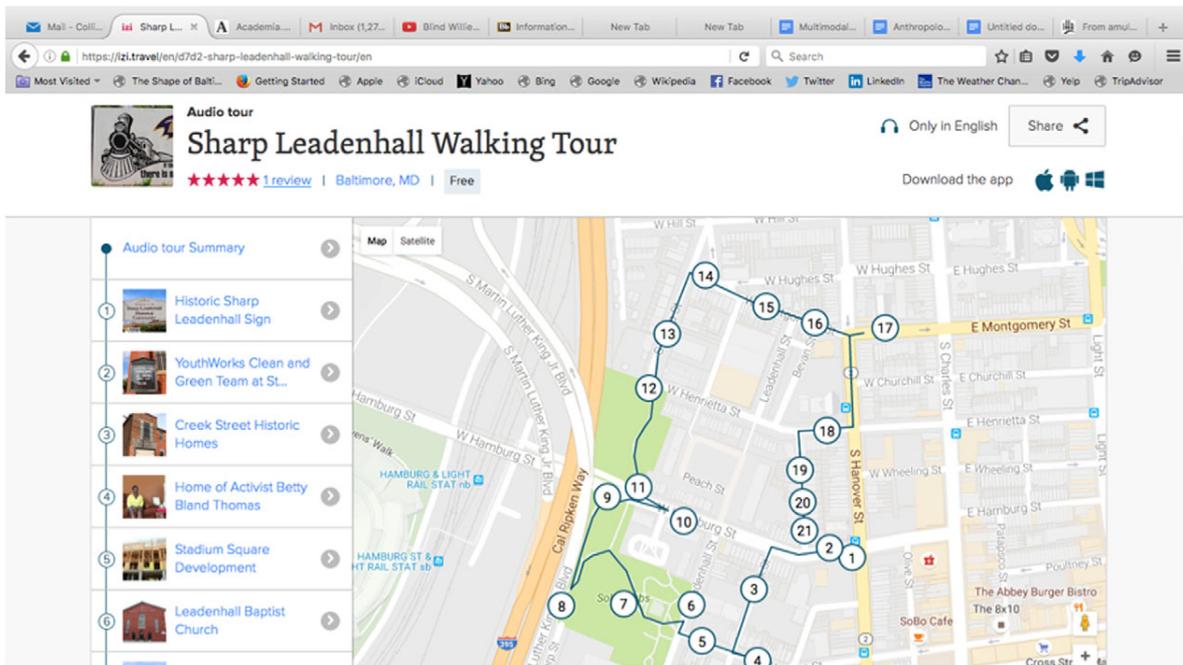


FIGURE 2. Screenshot of izi.travel app. (Screenshot taken by Samuel Collins) [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



FIGURE 3. Still from *Mardistan/Macholand*. (Gill 2014) [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

entirely new skill set, or investment in the latest high-tech gadgets and media equipment, or even membership in a particular group or society. Instead, a multimodal approach implores us to consider carefully the kinds of practices that are already present in how we have been “doing” anthropology. We hope that the shift from visual anthropology to Multimodal Anthropologies signals a tearing down of outdated disciplinary boundaries that have prevented us from embracing innovative ideas and approaches in our research and scholarship. By no means should the articulation of a multimodal future, as laid out in this essay, be seen as an attempt to draw new boundaries. Instead, we intend to begin an open dialogue about the future of our discipline, and we invite everyone to join in this ongoing conversation.

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## Anthropology, Film, Pedagogy, and Social Change: Reflections from an Experimental Course

Lauren Kelly, Neha Raheel, and Juliet Shen, with Arjun Shankar  
University of Pennsylvania

In the fall of 2015, Dr. Arjun Shankar and Dr. John L. Jackson Jr. initiated a course entitled *Social Change through Participatory Film* at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn). Three of the coauthors of this article (Lauren Kelly, Neha Raheel, and Juliet Shen) are Penn students who attended the course. Building upon several previous courses created by the Penn-affiliated organization CAMRA, the course was intended as an exploration of the sometimes tense relationship between the concepts of ethnography, participatory film, and social justice through the process of making collaborative films. The course brought together a diverse group of people—including master's students and undergraduate students from majors such as anthropology, medicine, nursing, social work, communication, education, and cinema studies. We placed our Penn students in a single classroom with 12 ninth-grade students from West Philadelphia High School's (WPHS) digital media program, taught by Mr. Azim Siddiqui. The student body at WPHS is 97 percent African American, and the school is located at 49th and Chestnut Streets, just along the outskirts of the Penn-led gentrification of West Philadelphia. The intended goal of the WPHS media program is to instill digital-and-media-literacy skills, including an understanding of filmmaking, website design, and graphic design, all of which prove useful to students as they seek work opportunities. The addition of the Penn students, along with digital tool kits (cameras, tripods, lighting, sound equipment, etc.), provided an applied learning experience for students to practice these skills.

We designed the course so that Penn students and WPHS students would work together in small groups with the sole directive to create a film about social change. WPHS students would choose the film topics, while Penn students and course teaching assistants (Debra Lui, Andrew Hudson, and Melissa Skolnick) would help guide the filmmaking process. While this represented some level of imposed structure placed upon the students, they had little difficulty brainstorming topics they deemed worthy, including issues of police brutality, catcalling, and negative representations of Philadelphia in the media. While the course officially met once a week on Thursdays, from 10:30 am to 1:30 pm, students realized that meeting outside of class was a necessity if they wished to complete the film products in the given time frame.

Over the course of the semester, the Penn and WPHS students learned the basics of filmmaking and ethnographic storytelling in order to shape their films. It should be empha-

sized that the course instructors encouraged students with all levels of filmmaking experience to join the class. Our primary motivation for this approach came out of our lessons from earlier course iterations, which placed Penn students in the roles of experts. This model tended to disempower our high school student collaborators, and only served to reinforce a much longer tradition of deficiency-based pedagogic practice, a model whereby students are assumed to be in need of help, while those from the outside are assumed to have the knowledge necessary to enable better lives.

The decision to place Penn and high school students on "equal footing" had many consequences, both positive and negative. One of the most fascinating consequences was observing some Penn students struggle to take on the role of learner in relationship to students who were younger than them and whom they may have (either implicitly or explicitly) assumed to be in need of their help (rather than the obverse). Indeed, one of the elements of the course we remain most proud of is the critical media-viewing sessions, which were held for three weeks at the beginning of the course. During these sessions, the Penn and WPHS students would be shown a film clip and then asked to discuss the clip from their differing vantage points. These clips ranged in topic from the cultural appropriation of traditionally black hairstyles to global connections across communities of color. In each context, students were forced to grapple with issues of gender, race, and class as depicted in media, which on more than one occasion led to students recognizing the ways in which larger structural forces can influence people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Interestingly, the WPHS students were, at least initially, far more comfortable than their Penn counterparts during these critical discussions, speaking earnestly about their perspectives and even directing questions toward the Penn students. Ultimately, it was this type of interaction that destabilized any simplistic notion of who could (and should) learn from whom and helped orient Penn students to think of ethnography as a pedagogic process centered around excavating one's own biases even as they learn about those whom they are in conversation with.

There are three dilemmas that we would like to highlight before turning to a discussion led by three Penn students about their group project, a series of short films entitled *Conversations from the Bench*, which focus on the issues of "catcalling" and street harassment. These dilemmas are: (1) the ethnographic approach; (2) participation; and (3) social change.

First, we interrogated the efficacy of ethnography for the goals of our course. In fact, entering the course, many Penn students questioned the use of ethnography entirely, challenging its primacy in both framing how we asked our filmic

questions and how we engaged with our high school participants. Our primary motivation for using an ethnographically driven approach was the need to educate ourselves about the context in which we were cocreating our films. As such, students were required to take fieldnotes each week, using these notes to learn more about their high school collaborators, discover insights that might be useful for their projects, and determine appropriate future courses of action. However, students were especially concerned that this ethnographic approach would result in an Othering that would derail their participatory and social-change ideals. How could we use the immense insight provided by the ethnographic method while not falling into the traps made apparent over anthropology's infamous history? As we critically engaged with this concern, we relied upon the longstanding literature on reflexive ethnography, attempting to construct a process founded upon the precepts of ethnographic sincerity (Jackson 2004). The camera was one means to think through these concepts, as students were forced to determine when and how each of them would be in front of and behind the camera, creating multiple reverse gazes—what Ginsburg (1995) termed the “parallax effect”—that drove many students to think through their positions in this particular school context with these particular high school students.

Second, Penn students grappled with the idea of participatory research and the extent to which this approach was possible within the framework of our course. We wanted to understand what participation looked like and if it was an ideal worth pursuing. Was participation a set of practices or an orientation toward collaboration? Was it deciding upon a theme together? Was it working on all tasks together or dividing up tasks evenly across group members? Students were especially wary of the “tyranny of participation,” a rhetorical move that suggested equal footing between participants but did little to destabilize the hierarchies that would naturally place them at the center of decision making whether or not they intended this (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Moreover, students were continuously struggling with their ideals of participation in relation to the stated goal of creating a complete film by the end of the semester. Their ideals at times conflicted with the very pragmatic problems of time management and those moments in which their high school collaborators were perhaps less prepared to complete particular tasks. For example, while high school students were enthusiastic about interviewing, filming, and storyboarding, they were less enthusiastic about the editing process, and Penn students struggled to determine how to maintain a participatory ethos given a quickly approaching deadline.

Finally, the Penn students struggled throughout the semester with the question of “where” social change resided. Was it in the process that they and their WPHS collaborators undertook or in the products they created? As they entered the course, many Penn students assumed that the goal of the course was to create documentary films to show to a broad set of audiences, which, in turn, could bring greater awareness to particular issues facing WPHS students. Beyond the

obvious difficulties of enacting such an ambitious goal in a single semester, what this mindset reflected was a broader idea of what social change looked like. For some Penn students entering the class, social change was predicated on the quality of the product that they created. However, over the course of the semester, the course instructors constantly advocated for a different approach to social change that focused on *process over product*. In this approach, Penn students were encouraged to think about how they and their WPHS collaborators were changing throughout their filmmaking process. Had something about their understanding of WPHS (or West Philadelphia more generally) changed? Had something about their relationship to filmmaking changed? These micro changes were the fodder for the reflexive praxis we sought to undertake (Freire 1970), and some of the students' most effective fieldnotes engaged with their own lessons during each session. In this sense, the project still relied on the experience of “being there,” which has always had the most direct impact on how aspiring anthropologists change the way they see the world in which they live (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009).

In the end, despite the many limitations of the endeavor, all four student groups created films that were complete enough to be shown as part of a film screening that took place at Penn during the last week of the semester. We invited members of each team to discuss their film before a group of more than 50 audience members from both the West Philadelphia and Penn communities. Teachers, parents, students, and Penn faculty grappled with the same questions we had discussed throughout the course, wanting to learn how our process unfolded over the course of five months. The final screening opened up many new questions about the life of such projects. Did the project end with the completion of the films? What constitutes a sustained relationship with a school community?

The rest of this article energizes the issues articulated above through the real-time difficulties that three Penn students (henceforth referenced as “we”) faced as they worked through the stages of filmmaking: preproduction, production, and post-production.

## PART 1: PREPRODUCTION

Prior to the commencement of the project, our class of Penn students met on a weekly basis to discuss some of our preliminary thoughts and ideas about participatory filmmaking and social change. Reading canonical ethnographic texts and watching ethnographic and documentary films, we began to think deeply about power relations and the insider/outsider dichotomy. A perfunctory analysis of our positionalities would reveal that we were outsiders; as privileged Penn students, we represented an elite culture that positioned us “outside” the WPHS community we were collaborating with. However, following Narayan's (1993) call to view the anthropologist in terms of “shifting identifications,” we began to problematize the insider/outsider dichotomy (671). For instance, one of the Penn students,

Neha, wrote in her weekly fieldnotes: “My identity as a Pakistani woman who can relate, generically and experientially, to issues of street harassment positions me in a way that facilitated rapport with the interlocutors. Despite my foreignness, I am able to relate to the experiences of the students. Particularly, the more time that I spend with them, and in Philadelphia, the more I am able to understand the ways in which female presence on the street is negotiated. While I will never fully become an ‘insider,’ I am no longer a complete ‘outsider’ either.”

Understanding the ways in which the anthropologist is simultaneously native and foreign (Jackson 2004), we began to transcend our initial paralysis about the Otherness that our presence in the WPHS classroom entailed. However, a second hurdle arose as we began wondering how this reflexivity would translate in the field, outside of the field (e.g., in our fieldnotes), and in the final product. Did the acknowledgement of our own subjectivities beyond reified social categories (Jackson 2004) extend only to the process of making the film, or were there ways to critically engage with our own presuppositions in the final product as well? Moreover, what was our role as Penn students in the creation of this film? As a group, we entered the school brimming with ideas about topics for the film. However, we chose to settle on street harassment and pressures faced by young women—an idea that the WPHS students (all themselves young women) suggested and in which they were deeply interested. Embroiled in the moment of excitement, we three Penn students immediately settled on the topic and began to tease out the details of the film. Upon later reflection, however, we questioned the implications of our privileging the voices of the WPHS students. Prior to going into the high school, we had been struggling with the notion of “participation” and what it entailed—were we filmmakers or participants? Were those two roles antagonistic? In the brainstorming session, it appeared as if we had been filmmakers/researchers first, and collaborators second. In other words, privileging the students’ voices meant that we had silenced our own.

However, as the project unfolded, the richness of the topic afforded us the space to incorporate multiple opinions and a diverse set of experiences. We discovered that in working on the film, we were never solely ethnographers, collaborators, participators, or facilitators. Instead, we were all four at once. Moreover, sometimes these identities came naturally to us (e.g., Juliet naturally assumed the role of the documentary filmmaker and the person with the most technical know-how), while in other roles we were a little more performative and deliberate in our actions (e.g., sometimes Neha had to push herself to actively insert her viewpoint on camera). Nonetheless, we began to focus our attention on “the quality of relations” that we strove for “with the people we [sought] to represent in our text” (Narayan 1993, 672). By building honest and authentic relationships that were based on a mutual desire to understand a complex issue, we were able to navigate our experiences in the field.

### **Reaching Toward Social Change while Navigating Participation**

Sociocultural anthropology is “at once the most resolutely academic and the most fiercely anti-academic of disciplines” (Ingold 1996, 1). As such, it contains dual impulses: the intrinsic value placed on the production of knowledge and the application of this knowledge toward creating change (Ingold 1996). *Conversations from the Bench* presented us with a unique opportunity to combine these two seemingly diametrically opposed impulses in anthropology. In our initial conceptualizations of the project, the film was meant to inspire social change on two levels. First, the product of our collaboration, the film, was intended to promote awareness about the gendered experiences of street harassment. Second, the process of creating the film was intended to allow the high school students to nuance their perspectives on catcalling and gendered narratives of street harassment (such as blaming catcalling on the way women dress). In doing so, however, we were often faced with several limitations that positioned the production process at odds with the final product. While we all agreed about wanting to create a media piece that looked visually appealing and created a lasting impact, we struggled with our definitions of social change. As such, Juliet asked in her field notes: “How do you document and observe, without intruding or affecting? What role do you have in the lives of the people you are documenting?”

In responding to these questions, we faced initial hiccups during the brainstorming session. For instance, there was a lot of debate about who the intended audience of our final product would be. While we, the Penn collaborators, wanted to expand the audience of the video to include male students, there was some hesitation from our three WPHS students who felt that their male counterparts would be indifferent to the product we would create, and hence, no social change would be achieved. For the Penn students, social change primarily entailed a change in the mindset of the young women with whom we were working; the change that we would engender in audiences of our final product would, thus, be an added bonus. For the WPHS students, however, the goal was to impact those who watched our product. While these goals were not mutually exclusive, the different priorities ascribed to each goal sometimes resulted in tensions in the group. At one meeting, for example, progress was halted because we had to revisit a lot of issues and decisions that had actually been decided. Reflecting on this experience, Neha wrote:

Thinking about my frustration, later on, however, made me realize that this is the “process” we were speaking about during our initial discussions—it is messy and chaotic to make a product with 6 people in one group (three of them being teenagers) and it is hard for everyone to be on the same page, all the time. However, maybe part of the way we’re all changing (the students and me) is in learning to give each other’s perspective the time it deserves, especially when it clashes with our own.

On a different occasion, when the team was preparing for a shoot, Juliet was trying to explain the mechanics of

the equipment to the WPHS students. However, two of the girls refused to listen and were instead focusing on applying makeup as they prepared to be “on camera.” Despite the fact that we were working on a project related to body image and catcalling, patriarchal and gender norms were always present in the room. We realized that our actions, both off and on camera, would reinforce and/or capitalize on the issues that we were working to address. Our project was not meant to be a critique of others but was, first and foremost, an introspective endeavor. Social change, for us, became increasingly about self-reflexivity and questioning our own assumptions in the process of making our film.

For example, we found out early on that we had vastly different views about street harassment than some of the WPHS students in our group. During our initial discussions, the WPHS students often told us that it was almost always a woman’s fault if they were harassed, that what mattered most was how a woman dressed and “carried herself” in front of men. We challenged this notion during discussions, but more importantly, we wanted to explore these questions in the course of our project. Our goal as collaborators was not to change the opinions of the WPHS students to those of our own but to encourage a process of reflection when such events occurred in their daily lives.

## PART 2: PRODUCTION

Our group first had to decide upon a style for our film. Rather than creating a public service announcement about street harassment, or interviewing only the members in our group, we wanted to engage multiple and opposing voices in a conversation about the topic of street harassment. This meant engaging people both female and male of various ages about the topic.

During the conception of our film project, we made the decision to use a bench where we would conduct our interviews throughout the video series (hence the title *Conversations from the Bench*). We constructed by hand one red bench for outdoor scenes and used preexisting benches when filming in other locations (i.e., the gymnasium). We thought of the bench as a proverbial “talking stick” intended to be a device to create a consistent physical and symbolical space for safe conversation in the different settings in which we filmed. As a group, we worked with the students to brainstorm the questions they wanted to ask the two groups. These questions can be found in Appendix 1.

In the production of episode 1, the Penn students’ roles were mostly technical in nature (filming and sound), but we did occasionally ask some interview questions. Because the high school was the WPHS students’ environment, it felt most natural to let them take the lead on producing, interviewing, and directing. However, this also produced some complicated negotiations regarding participation. Were we merely filming students’ interactions? Were they learning the requisite filmmaking skills while they learned interviewing skills? Ultimately, we followed our WPHS students’ lead

despite the fact that this meant they did not take on as many traditional filmmaking roles (i.e., the roles *behind* rather than in front of the camera) as we had initially expected. The students chose their female peers in a private and safe space, the girls’ locker room, where narratives of vulnerability in scenarios of street harassment emerged. In their recounting, WPHS students were able to perform their experiences and receive feedback from their peers who had been in similar circumstances. The space allowed the young women to openly offer feelings of low self-worth, shame, and fear, as well as moments of recognition, validation, and empowerment. This intimate gathering was contained, however, by the bounds of production as the students stewarded their peers through introductory questions, closing thoughts, and signing of release forms.

In episode 2, our group took to the street directly outside of the high school in West Philadelphia, to start spontaneous conversations with passersbys about street harassment, having to grow up too fast, and women’s dress codes. We used many of the same questions as the previous episode but also let conversations develop on their own based on the participants’ responses. The production roles were more balanced in this episode, perhaps because the street environment felt more like neutral territory to many of the group members than the high school. The WPHS students chose and approached potential interviewees, and the adults acted as producers, keeping the schedule moving for our very tight production timeline. As a larger group, we collectively filmed, recorded sound, and interviewed the participants on the bench. The WPHS students were now exercising their perspectives more publicly, navigating a greater breadth of influences—namely, their status as young female digital-media students—in their interactions with members of the larger West Philadelphia community. “Why can’t we wear shorts?” asked one WPHS student to a young man she was interviewing, testing the limits of his rationale that women in shorts “just want one thing.” Moments later, she and another student joined with him as they tried to understand what motivated his behavior toward some of the women he had “catcalled.” Through our probing as a team, allowing whoever was on the bench to own the moment, we were able to practice being conscious of others’ voices while also modulating and reflecting on our own voices.

## **Researching with the Camera: Conflicts and Collaboration**

From our first group brainstorming meeting we noticed tension among some of the WPHS students. We were later informed by their teacher that indeed a few of the members of our group did not get along with one student in particular, and that he had intentionally placed them together. Fights between the WPHS students, ranging from mumbled insults to one narrowly avoided physical altercation, were a regular part of our meetings. We often spent equal amounts of time diffusing tempers or discussing interpersonal issues as we did trying to get production work completed. This

added additional stress to our project, as our timeline for completion was already quite short. The conflicts between group members also brought up questions related to participation and representation within our production process and finished product. Were we truly representing every group member's views on the subject? Was our film reflecting the messy and sometimes difficult realities of our students' lives or just the positive images we wanted audiences to see?

Over time, we found that the best strategy we could deploy to combat these many conflicts was to focus on the *production process itself*. While we knew we could never hope to change the dynamics associated with students' complex social lives, we also knew that each of the WPHS students were quite invested in completing a film, especially the two members who otherwise did not get along. We used this knowledge to our advantage, focusing their attention on the particular roles they had been given, whether it was as primary interviewer, audio recorder, or the like. We then used our production structure to create opportunities for the group members to work together and reflect on why conflict might have occurred. We noticed that many of the issues of contention reflected the themes of our project. Initially there was tension between two group members due to one calling the other "errbody's jawn," a derogatory phrase describing a girl who talks to many boys at school. In this moment we pointed out to them that this was part of the power and gender dynamics we wanted to explore in the project. Our hope was that in discussing these topics, the WPHS students might realize the structural societal forces behind their implied notions of one another—that is, that women have historically been portrayed as objects. While it was hard to discern whether these discussions had an impact on our WPHS group members outside of our filmmaking time together, we did notice some changes in their words and actions on camera. For example, two of the students began to speak of street harassment in terms of power dynamics, a concept we introduced to them in discussions early on but that did not seem to take hold until the process of filming was finished.

Despite these conflicts, as a group we were able to identify and agree upon two themes that emerged during our interviews. The first theme was the reality of escalating violence toward women and girls that stems from street harassment, and the second theme was the importance of fathers in influencing how boys treat women. Importantly, both of these themes emerged through the process of filmmaking. The camera's presence structured our dialogue and the WPHS students' roles as filmmakers provided them a powerful position from which to ask the difficult questions in which they were interested. These new vantage points, both in front of and behind the camera, allowed the students to explore types of dialogue that might not have been possible otherwise.

For example, in episode 1, when we filmed our discussion with male students in the school gymnasium, the camera heightened the level of gender performance or at least called

it more directly into view. Fingering their hair and smoothing skirts, the young women remained very conscious of a sense of male presence, and vice versa, as the young men "played it cool." Watching the films during editing, all of our on-screen gestures had been memorialized. We were able to remember that on the courtside bench the boys took turns cradling the basketball, mediating between wisecracks and their Twitter feeds. The dialogue ebbed and flowed as vulnerabilities reached a height during the group's discussion of fathers and their potential to influence their sons' perceptions of women. In large part, the boys maintained a tightly sealed front of disinterest to the girls' concerns, much to their (and our, as collaborators) visible frustration. However, it was also clear that the boys were conscious of and even inviting of the camera, looking directly at the lens as they spoke. After several failed attempts by our team to invite perspective-taking among the boys, the exchange ended on an upbeat chord, somewhat dissonantly rendered. "If men could respect women," said one of the boys, "the world would be a better place." Even as most of the girls remained suspect, one of them high-fived the boy for his declaration—a way of showing gratitude for his time. Seconds later the school bell rang and everyone shuffled out of the auditorium, pulling themselves from the magnetic camera gaze, but not before shooting a few more hoops. "Film this! You filming?" said one of the boys as he lobbed the ball from mid-court.

### PART 3: POST-PRODUCTION

Throughout the editing process, we Penn students and our WPHS collaborators negotiated our changing perspectives with our representation in the film. We gathered with the WPHS students for several class periods to screen and critique "rough cuts" of the episodes. Although we implored them to assist directly with editing, they preferred the role of "executive producers," which was also more feasible given the time constraints in the classroom. Among the Penn students, much of the editing fell to those with the most experience. Nonetheless, all group members weighed in on editing choices, from overall content, to sequencing, to music. We all were very conscious of self-representation and meaning making, but the WPHS students were notably more so, which was evident in their editorial suggestions. For example, there was a lengthy discussion about the meaning of laughter in episode 1 after one of the WPHS students parrots the words of a male peer: "Yerp! Shorty with the tights!" This sends the whole locker room of girls into a fit of giggles. "I don't like the laughter there," said one of our student collaborators. "It makes it seem like we're okay with that kind of talk." Another student responded that perhaps it showed some solidarity among the girls, a group acknowledgement of both comical disbelief and implicit disapproval. We resolved to keep the laughter in the final cut, though we shortened its duration.

Most powerful for us was episode 3 (currently in post-production), a post-hoc reflection of our journey together.

We sat down with our entire eight-person film crew to discuss the things we had learned about each other and what the project meant for each of us. As in prior episodes, each of us took turns appearing on and off camera in different permutations. The inclusion of these meta-process dialogues on camera enabled ongoing iterative reflection on the knowledge we were uncovering. Each of us was able to define our positionalities while also acknowledging the dynamics of our group: addressing intragroup tensions, differing identities, and disparate experiences. As the Penn student collaborators, we were not invisible researchers but rather active participants in the project, coming to terms with the ways in which we were influencing the students and vice versa. We were not seeking an objective “untainted reality” of the WPHS students, but instead we remained conscious of our social relationships with the students, which shaped our dialogues and on-camera performances. Interestingly, as previously noted, we found that the WPHS students began to own language previously uttered by us, the Penn students, critiquing power relations and challenging views elicited in our interviews, particularly with the boys. This was a decidedly “dialogic” process (Freire 1970), and the students appeared to be newly defining and reflecting on their own perspectives, recognizing the influence that others’ perspectives were having (Worthman 2004). This transformation, made possible by the richness of our social interactions, meant being comfortable enough in the filmic space to deconstruct and reconstruct our own ideas. Penn students were not excluded from this transformation, as we, too, experienced and acted within a social world to which we had previously not been privy.

When the time came for the exhibition of our films, the WPHS students were driving ideas about how they wanted the series to be influential. Having chosen their peers as the intended audience, they wanted to invite other (and future) WPHS students into dialogue by sharing the film. At the screening event, several of the students felt comfortable speaking publicly about their perspectives, which reflected a recognition of the gender and power dynamics at play in street harassment. Though the WPHS students may not have identified as social-justice advocates at the start of our work together, they implicitly assumed advocacy roles when speaking on behalf of the film. At the screening, one of the student’s fathers approached our film team to express his excitement about his daughter’s passion for these issues. While some feedback about the films was slightly dismissive, reflecting a view that the students and their peers did not go far enough in challenging norms, our whole crew felt great pride in not only the quality of the product we had made but also in our process. By cultivating an orientation toward questioning and reflecting, we challenged each other to speak for ourselves, to start a conversation with others and to join each other in creating social change.

Finally, our films were also uploaded on Vimeo, and we created a Wordpress website and Instagram account to further disseminate and promote the series. Most recently,

we entered the films into a local youth film festival and plan to continue submitting to future festivals. Our videos have also been recently mentioned on the website *Stop Street Harassment* ([www.stopstreetharassment.org](http://www.stopstreetharassment.org)), dedicated to documenting and ending gender-based street harassment worldwide.

While we continue to pay heed to our goal of using film to create further conversations, we are constantly thinking about the impact that we had on the WPHS students. In what ways, if at all, have their perspectives changed in the long run? Mindful of the need for sustainable ways of maintaining relationships with our collaborators, we currently have an ongoing dialogue on social media, made possible by our shared interest in Instagram and Snapchat, where we still appreciate with admiration, and often fascination, our similarities and differences.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, by conceptualizing ethnography as an “active enterprise,” whereby participating and observing are “dialectically related and interdependent activities,” we were able to transcend our understanding of ethnographic research and social change being antithetical to each other (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 23). Moreover, we were able to understand the intimate connections between the final product (the ethnographic film) and the collaborative process of creating the film (the ethnographic method) (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). It is within this process that we situate the social change we achieved by developing relationships with students at the school that allowed them to become critical consumers of stories. If reality is produced by “terministic systems” (Carey 1989, 25), there were several realities that were created by the school, the students, us, and the one element that brought us together: the camera. These realities did not always coexist; the students had lives outside of the classroom, which sometimes brought chaos and conflict into the production process. However, it was in realizing and appreciating that complexity that we were all able to be benefactors of the change that we wished to create.

We would encourage readers to watch the video series, which can be found at: <https://conversationsfromthebench.wordpress.com/>. Perhaps more than any textual rendering, the films themselves “show” the dilemmas, outcomes, and themes that we have briefly touched upon in this article.

## Appendix 1: Interview Questions

### QUESTIONS FOR GIRLS

- How does it make you feel when someone catcalls/hollers at you?
- How do you respond when someone catcalls you?
- Do you feel like you are supposed to respond, or is it okay to ignore them? How do they usually act if you don’t respond and just keep walking?

- Do you think it's a compliment, or harassment? What makes it different?
- Do you think it's okay for older men to catcall to young women? Why or why not?
- Do you ever feel afraid? How do you act if you do feel afraid?

#### QUESTIONS FOR BOYS

- When you see a girl get catcalled on the street, how does it make you feel? What if it's a stranger? What if it's someone you know?
- Do you or your friends ever catcall girls on the street?
- Do you think it matters how a girl is dressed when she's on the street?
- What can you tell about a girl based on how she's dressed?
- Do you think that boys' fathers have an influence on how they treat girls/women? Why or why not?

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