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Citation
Westmoreland, M. R. (2022). Multimodality: reshaping anthropology. *Annual Review Of Anthropology*, *51*, 173-194. doi:10.1146/annurev-anthro-121319-071409

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ANNUAL REVIEWS

Annual Review of Anthropology

Multimodality: Reshaping Anthropology

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Annu. Rev. Anthropol. 2022. 51:173–94

First published as a Review in Advance on July 18, 2022

The *Annual Review of Anthropology* is online at anthro.annualreviews.org

https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-121319-071409

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Keywords

multimodal, audiovisual, sensorial, ethnography, research creation, mediation

Abstract

Multimodality offers anthropologists an inflection on the way we do research, produce scholarship, teach students, and relate to diverse publics. Advancing an expanding array of tools, practices, and concepts, multimodality signals a change in the way we pay attention and attend to the diverse possibilities for understanding the human experience. Multimodality recognizes the way smartphones, social media, and digital software transform research dynamics in unprecedented ways, while also drawing upon longstanding practices of recording and presenting research through images, sounds, objects, and text. Rather than flatten out ethnographic participant observation into logocentric practices of people-writing, multimodal ethnographies diversify their modes of inquiry to produce more-than-textual mediations of sensorial research experiences. By emphasizing kaleidoscopic qualities that give shape to an emergent, multidimensional, and diversifying anthropology, multimodality proposes alternatives to enduring and delimiting dichotomies, particularly text/image. These new configurations invite unrealized disciplinary constellations and research collaborations to emerge, but also require overhauling the infrastructures that support training, dissemination, and assessment.

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1. A MULTIMODAL TURN?

Nowadays we all are ostensibly doing multimodal anthropology, perhaps clumsily (Westmoreland & Luning 2018) or unreflexively (Takaragawa et al. 2019) or even ambivalently (Alvarez Astacio et al. 2021). With the generational shift in media sensibilities, in which increasingly interconnected socio-technological devices and the proliferation of DIY media experimentation intersect with the ethical imperative for participatory research collaboration, anthropologists grapple daily with various forms of mediation (Collins et al. 2017b). Reframed for research dynamics that include routine uses of smartphones, social media, and digital software, anthropology's various operational processes have become deeply entangled within our personal networks and shared digital ecologies (Varvantakis & Nolas 2018). These broad developments may indicate that the adjectival descriptor will become unnecessarily redundant.[1] Despite the increased usage of the term multimodality in scholarly publications, conference abstracts, workshop proceedings, and job advertisements, this author consistently hears questions of confusion ("But what exactly is it?"), comments of frustration ("It seems to mean everything and nothing."), and statements of disapproval ("I don't really like the word; can't we come up with something better?"). Awkward jargon notwithstanding, this combination of general applicability and common bewilderment nevertheless speaks to the term's potential in a moment when both its definition and its exact practice are still taking shape.

Put simply, multimodal anthropology both attends to the diverse ways of knowing the human experience and advances an expanding array of tools, practices, and concepts to share these understandings. Anthropological mediation encompasses an expanding terrain of research objects ranging from field notes and drawings (Gunn 2009, Taussig 2011), snapshots and social media (Marion & Crowder 2013, Collins & Durington 2014), and audio recordings and transcriptions (Erlmann 2004, pp. 1–20; Kapchan 2017b) to formal productions of ethnographic films (Henley 2020), photo series (Hoffman 2012), soundscapes (Feld 1991), podcasts (Durrani et al. 2015), and gaming apps (Collins et al. 2017a) to dissemination at festivals (Vallejo & Peirano 2017), installations (De Leon 2019), exhibitions (Jørgensen 2018), and ephemeral events like workshops, performances, sound walks, and pop-up screenings (Takaragawa et al. 2020). Multimodal frameworks inform theoretical strategies for remixing (Hennessy et al. 2018) and making critical interventions within vastly unexplored archives of "expedition content" (Karel & Kusumaryati 2020, Spray 2020) but may also address the circulation of bootlegs for unintended audiences (Stout 2014).

While the proliferation of digital technology undoubtedly brings anthropology into view in unprecedented ways, multimodality is not reducible to the use of new media or digital technologies (Wilson & Peterson 2002), which may simply echo earlier colonial practices (Mattern 2016). Furthermore, "the haste to adopt ever-new technologies" may threaten to prematurely crystalize a "still unformed aggregation of research topics, designs, methods, and methodologies" that constitute this emergent field (Hurdley et al. 2017, p. 748). Multimodality is fundamentally a reaction against text-centric and visualist problematics that undergird anthropological legacies of epistemic authority. Rebuking the crippling dichotomization of text and image (or any of their echoes), multimodality offers a more radical epistemological project that is better conceptualized by shifting kaleidoscopic perspectives.

While multimodal conceptual frameworks can be critically applied to the routine practices of field-based ethnography, the term does less to describe an anthropological status quo than signal anthropology's inevitable reconfiguration. By pulling sensory, collaborative, and decolonizing agendas into its orbit, a multimodal agenda seems to offer a more inclusive worldview, where

[1] John J. Jackson's assertion during an American Anthropological Association panel on multimodality in 2016.

diverse constituents can find new mutual ground. Multimodality therefore signals both expanding and incorporating gestures that may enable new disciplinary constellations and research partnerships, thereby reframing protracted problems and revealing unrealized approaches to the aporias of ethics, representation, and interpretation (Lather 2001).

2. FRAMEWORKS FOR MULTIMODAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Where some anthropologists assume that the moniker of multimedia is synonymous with multimodality, this commonplace and seemingly self-evident term fails to capture the polysemic affordances of a floating signifier smuggled in from unrelated technical and industrial fields. The current uptake of multimodality in anthropology links to its deployment by semioticians, who depart from traditions that privilege verbal language in isolation and push to better understand how the combination of various "semiotic resources" influence meaning making (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001). While various sign systems, including language, images, gestures, dress, music, architecture, and so forth, all constitute specific modes, proponents have come to see these resources within integrated wholes (Jewitt et al. 2016), a combination that constitutes "the normal state of human communication" (Kress 2010).

By way of example, a film is inherently multimodal, not only because it is (typically) an audio/visual combination but also because it will likely include textual elements from titles and credits to subtitles and intertitles and potentially diegetically captured text. Each shot may contain diegetic sounds, music, or voice as well as shapes, colors, tones, and textures that all contribute to the mise-en-scène, not to mention the choices of perspective conveyed by composition and editing strategies. These works never exist in a vacuum but bear the traces of the technologies used to produce, assemble, and distribute them. The scratched surfaces, debris and decay, pixilation and static, flickering hum of the projector, and glow of the tablet's screen all contribute to the material traces, while the skills, optics, sensoria, and dispositions inscribed in the apparatus hint at overt and taken-for-granted epistemes. And the accessibility of the film via distributors, exhibitors, and archives indicates the relational infrastructures that afford or delimit the film to play at your fingertips, in your classroom, at a film festival, or during a street sit-in, where, perhaps, it is curated within conceptualized programs and contextualized in opening introductions, accompanied by Q&As, or left to speak for itself.

Whereas a semiotic framework for multimodality has evolved into linguistic specializations, like conversation analysis, systemic functional linguistics, and social semiotics, many social scientists have deployed multimodal ethnography to better contextualize "interactional practices" (Jewitt et al. 2016, p. 110). And yet, the promise of combining different media into an integrated fusion belies a tendency to still treat multisemiotic modes separately (Dicks et al. 2006). Noting how researchers in various disciplines have adopted these semiotic methods ad hoc (cf. Smith et al. 2016), earlier reviewers characterized multimodal ethnography as "betwixt and between excitement for experimentation and criticism of lack of focus and incoherence" (Kohrs 2017).

Building on the observation by Varvantakis & Nolas (2019) that multimodal ethnography had heretofore focused primarily on communicative modes as objects of analysis rather than on reflexively applying multimodal approaches to their methods of inquiry, not to mention producing alternative research outputs, this review registers a seismic shift within the past few years signaled by a cascade of constitutively multimodal ethnographies. Sections 2.1–2.3 examine how multimodal frameworks challenge the conventions of ethnography as text-based accounts of participant observations made in situ and instead reflexively and collaboratively advance more-than-textual mediations of sensorial research experiences. Each section closes with a spotlight on an exemplary instance of multimodal ethnography.

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2.1. Graphic Foundations

Multimodality elaborates existing efforts (namely in visual anthropology) to advance a more-than-textual anthropology. It owes thanks to the *Writing Culture* collection for facilitating reflexive assessments of anthropology's authorial voice and sparking a broader debate about the "poetics and politics of ethnography" (Clifford & Marcus 1986), but pushes for further elaboration. Despite exposing literary devices and ethnographic tropes that usurped the voice of the subaltern, the volume's singular focus on conventional inflections of ethnography neglected feminist and BIPOC+ (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) counterstrategies (Golde 1986, Trinh 1991, Behar & Gordon 1996, Moraga & Anzaldúa 2015). The debate assumed that the monograph would remain the preferred form of anthropological scholarly production and that the anthropologist was first and foremost a writer (Geertz 1973). Whether "clinging to verbal description" (Mead 1995, p. 5) or trying to master their written craft, anthropological scriveners have since felt compelled to "sharpen their writing tools" (Wulff 2016, p. 3), seek literary inspiration (Narayan 2012), and experiment with different forms of prose (Stewart 2007, Elliott 2016, Bakke & Peterson 2017, Pandian & McLean 2017), if not poetry (Trethewey 2007, Rosaldo 2013). Although the standard ethnographic monograph is richly multimodal—possibly including personal narratives, interview transcripts, and archival excepts, not to mention maps, tables, and illustrations—written text remained anthropology's hegemonic "monomedia" (Pink 2006, p. 12), and audiovisual mediation remained "noticeably absent" from the discussion (Howes 2019, p. 19).

In fact, the *Writing Culture* critique may have done more to disparage visualist tropes of observation and description than decentering writing for other modes of analysis to flourish. Diagnosed as a widespread "iconophobia," an adherence to discursivity blinded many anthropologists to film's nondiscursive affordances (Taylor 1996). That said, a corresponding logophobia hypercritical to discursive forms may further "dichotomize bodily sensorial knowledge and linguistic expression" (Porcello et al. 2010). Whereas multimodal practices have created speculative spaces for experimenting "beyond text," multimodal practitioners are increasingly mindful not to ignore the representational politics inscribed and embodied in various articulations of voice (Cox et al. 2016). Rather than words and images vying for superiority, a multimodal approach encourages kaleidoscopic combinations of objects, text, images, and sounds in ways that unsettle lexical hierarchies.

Although typically glossed as people-writing, the etymology of ethnography actually contains the foundation for an expansive multimodal repertoire (Westmoreland 2021). For instance, the inherently multimodal qualities already inscribed within the root *grapho*—scratching on a surface—encompass a variety of embodied mark-making gestures and lend meaning to a broad spectrum of mediating practices ranging from cartography and cinematography to phonography and photography. More specifically, Ingold (2007, p. 2) compellingly champions the etymological commonality between writing and drawing in an effort to "revive the discipline." Drawing itself is multimodal, able to take many forms, as superbly demonstrated by the extensive online exhibition Illustrating Anthropology (see **https://illustratinganthropology.com**), but until recently ethnographic drawing seemed "forgotten" (Wettstein 2018), "virtually dead" (Ramos 2015), and "rarely discussed in books on anthropology field methods" (Hendrickson 2008). Nowadays, conferences often host drawing workshops, supported by newly available training resources (cf. Causey 2016). Rather than offer realist depictions, these graphic modalities show how triangulating among page, practice, and place offers perceptual strategies that combine thinking, seeing, and doing in ways that help expand our conceptual and methodological horizons (Hendrickson 2008). Drawing offers access to unconventional conceptual menageries (Jain 2019), the "unthinkable mind"

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underlying forms of creativity (Barry 2014), and possibly "the invisible, inexplicable, otherworldly, supernatural, and transcendent" (Middleton 2020), if not also "a talisman" (Taussig 2011, p. 2).

The comic genre also offers opportunities for new forms of academic publishing. Inspired by Sousanis's (2015) stunning graphic treatise on "unflattening" our thinking about images and text, University of Toronto Press launched a series of "ethnoGRAPHIC" combinations to create effective and powerful ways of simply rendering complex ideas (Hamdy & Nye 2018). In its inaugural graphic novel, *Lissa: A Story About Medical Promise, Friendship, and Revolution*, anthropologists Hamdy & Nye (2017) combine their respective research contexts through two fictionalized illness narratives that juxtapose different medical and cultural perspectives on health. The project relied upon collaborations with graphic artists, designers, and a documentary filmmaker, who traveled together to Egypt as the foundation for a shared research experience with various locations and interlocutors. Recognizing the form's unique mode of presentation, the book includes a guide for neophytes on how to read comic page design. More than a book, *Lissa* constitutes a richly layered collaborative project, which includes a constellation of secondary sources that "allow users to follow multiple paths of inquiry" (Hamdy & Nye 2016).

2.2. Expanded Sensorium

Multimodal methods cultivate ethnography as a practice-based approach to the way the researcher's body serves as the primary instrument of investigation. Unique among social science methodologies, the credo of cultural immersion has been the mainstay of ethnographic research for a century. That said, Poole (2005, p. 160) argues that the "perceptual act" of participant observation historically confined the native/ethnographer dyad "within the directional dialectic of a Cartesian metaphysics," thereby leaving "little room for thinking about other, alternative scenarios in which vision, technology, and difference might be differently related." Based on "the problematic assumption that reality is visible, observable, and recordable" (Pink 2001, p. 23), the centrality of observation betrays an epistemological bias that equates vision with understanding (Fabian 2002). Once celebrated as "the highest of the sensory faculties" for its immediacy and apparent veracity, sight came under increasing scrutiny for its surveilling and objectifying gaze (Crary 1990, pp. 96–131; Jay 1994). This enduring tension around the ethnographic gaze has long "fascinated and troubled anthropologists" (MacDougall 1998, p. 64). While early filmmaking initiatives produced primarily narrative forms of entertainment (Griffiths 2002), the earliest scientific expeditions and colonial surveys stereotypically employed photography as positivist evidence of racial hierarchies (Edwards 1992). And yet, while the immediacy and precision of photography enraptured early anthropologists, the excess of detail resisted their efforts to construct generalizable typologies (Edwards 1992, Poole 1997, Pinney 2011), ultimately provoking skepticism about "photography's scientific value" (Griffiths 2002, p. xxv). First encumbered by visualist assumptions of an automatic "mechanical objectivity" and then mistrust of a dispassionate "structural objectivity" (Pels 2014), it is no surprise that no other "sense has been more thoroughly interrogated by anthropologists than sight" (Porcello et al. 2010, p. 56).

Complicating the critiques of ocularcentrism, recuperative efforts foreground the way sight is situated and enacted. Grimshaw (2001) explores the role of vision in different moments of twentieth-century British anthropology to demonstrate how differentiated "ways of seeing" correspond to different theoretical epochs. Noting the visualist's "sweeping condemnation" of "the overview, the gaze, or the panoptic," Grasseni (2007, p. 2) also attempts to "rehabilitate" sight by demonstrating vision as a variable learned practice she calls "skilled vision" (p. 4). Accentuating the importance of enskillment, Nippert-Eng (2015) argues that ethnographers are typically very unskilled at observing, compared with participating and conversing. This echoes

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the claim that "learning to see with visual accuracy" presents "a challenge to the fieldworker whose training is literary rather than visual" (Collier & Collier 1986, p. 5). Aided by different mediating technologies, Causey (2016) argues that drawing can remedy certain forms of cognitive blindness, while MacDougall (2005, p. 243) cautions that the ability "to look with the camera, rather than merely see with it, took ethnographic filmmakers a long time."

Rather than imagine a scene with ethnographic filmmakers "weighted down with odd machines entangled with wires, [who] imagine they are unnoticed" (Weinberger 1994, p. 3), proponents of observational cinema (the mainstay of ethnographic filmmaking practice) emphasize its ambitions as "a sensuous, interpretive, and phenomenologically inflected mode of inquiry" (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009, p. ix). Accordingly, an observational stance can "radically realign the body" and allow different epistemological possibilities to "come into view" (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2005, p. 9). Emerging as a response against prevailing modes of journalistic and didactic filmmaking, the observational intention is thus less attuned to documenting reality than enacting a form of empathy (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2009), which may signal an authorial praxis that operates beyond vision through more encompassing "ways of doing" ethnography (Henley 2020).

Indeed, Stoller (1997) suggests that ethnographers must foreground the broad attunement of their perceptual awareness to make sense of unfamiliar and naturalized spaces. Looking to overhaul the ocularcentric propensities in participant observation, Pink (2009) sheds the visualist framework for "participant sensing," and Laplantine (2015) favors "the practice of participant sensation." This expansion of an integrated sensorium "straddles the divide between mind and body, cognition and sensation" (Howes 2009, p. 1). Whether in the field, at a desk, or elsewhere, making sense/sense making "is at once an intellectual and visceral process" (Varvantakis & Nolas 2019, p. 368). And yet, compared with the efforts to recuperate vision, other sensory registers remain underdeveloped. Even visual anthropologists have largely ignored the significance of film sound despite the synergy of audio/visual combinations in ethnographic film (Henley 2007). In general, practices of listening, recording, and composing sound remain neglected (Samuels et al. 2010). And in fields like ethnomusicology, rather than creating audio publications, "text production and writing remain cornerstones of disciplinary practice" (Faudree 2012). Rather than accept a positivist position between subject and object reified when writing about sound, Kapchan (2017a) advances nonrepresentational notions of sound writing as a performance "resonating through bodies." Similarly, Littlejohn (2021) recuperates the notion of poetics as a generative quality of shared listening practices in sound by building on Feld's (2015) methods of dialogic editing to understand the acoustemology of "relational listening histories." Though distribution remains largely limited to circles of audiophiles, a growing number of sonic ethnographies provide crucial methodological and epistemological touchstones (cf. Schafer 1973, Feld 1991, Cox & Carlyle 2012, Karel 2016).

In order to address the challenges of publishing about a mode as ephemeral as sound, Ferrarini & Scaldaferri's (2020) book *Sonic Ethnography* provides multiple ways of reading, viewing, and hearing the sounding histories of rural communities in southern Italy. Published as part of Manchester University Press's new anthropological series that foregrounds creative practices, the book exemplifies many multimodal ambitions through different methodological and design strategies. While foregrounding hearing as a culturally inflected way of knowing, the authors combine collaborative listening with editing strategies in order to build "arguments in sound." In addition to written essays, the book includes sound chapters (accessible via QR codes) structured around different anthropological concepts as well as photo-ethnographic sequences designed in different stylistic configurations of text and photo. Common among examples of multimodal publishing, the book is part of a larger constellation of outputs including performances and installations, as well as "interdisciplinary collaborations" (cf. Panopoulos et al. 2020).

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2.3. Reflexive Im/mediacy

With its focus on face-to-face in situ participant observation, anthropologists conventionally derive authority from the unmediated access of "being there." This "cult of immediacy" (Mazzarella 2004) nevertheless relies upon "epistemological practices of purification" (Samuels et al. 2010) to bolster a hubris of critical distance. Multimodality highlights the reflexive interface between communicative forms and sensorial experiences. Indeed, mediation shapes ethnography through formal and informal practices of world making happening at every stage of research, from data generation to dissemination (Collins et al. 2017b). As captured in the recurring updates to the *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* handbooks, the anthropological toolbox has evolved through various recognizable tropes of mediation. Whereas nineteenth-century "armchair anthropologists" relied upon others' written accounts in practices of "epistolary ethnography" (Stocking 1995, p. 16), the earliest anthropological expeditions went with an astonishing array of recording instruments (Howes 2015). And while twentieth-century anthropologists typically carried some combination of notebooks, typewriters, audio recorders, photographic cameras, and film/video cameras to the field, surely most anthropologists nowadays go with a multifunction recording tool in their pocket without consciously including the ubiquitous smartphone within their methodological toolbox. Capable of making photos, videos, audio recordings, voice memos, text notes, GPS trackings, and so forth, and able to dynamically edit these together with existing media that are readily accessible through touchscreen technology and archivable on various networked media platforms, the smartphone enables anthropologists and their interlocutors to instantly reach diverse and variable publics in "the cloud" and around the globe. At the intersection of many forms of mediated relations—"embedded, embodied and everyday" (Hine 2015)—the accessibility and ubiquity of new networked technology have rapidly altered the way anthropologists conduct their research and have had direct implications on the way we manage data, negotiate research relationships, and disseminate scholarship.

Rather than imagining data as preexisting entities awaiting collection in our transparent containers, multimodality recognizes the way research mediation actually brings data into existence. It thus follows that if the visualist critique of observational representation is a recursive fantasy of unmediated authenticity, then its counterposition foregrounds the "mediated sensorium" (Jones 2018) in which meditation thus does not reproduce sensory experience but rather serves as "a technology for the senses" (Cox et al. 2016, p. 10). While the senses are always entangled, so too are media always "mixed" in "synesthesiac experiences" (Mitchell 2005). In other words, our enlarged sensorium is not only embodied but also augmented by media. Accordingly, a multimodal framework embraces the "space of indeterminacy inherent to all processes of mediation" (Mazzarella 2004), which helps cultivate both the generativity of cultural poiesis (Stewart 2008) and "the circumstances in which new knowledge can take us by surprise" (MacDougall 1998, p. 163). Aligned with generative models of research creation (Loveless 2019), mediation's "capacity to bring forth" offers an interchange between the immediacy of making and the lasting durability of the made (Ingold 2013, p. 2), in which the traces of unintended noise become reflexive features of a distributed agency among people, machines, and environments. Aside from specifically practice-based approaches, many STS (science and technology studies) anthropologists have long used multimodal frameworks and creative interventions to get inside the processes at the core of methodological inventiveness (Evans 2020).

Part of Stanford University Press's digital publication series, the nonlinear and open-access *Feral Atlas: The More-Than-Human Anthropocene* (Tsing et al. 2020) demonstrates many of the principles of generative mediation and multimodal strategies. Building on Tsing's (2015) call for an "art of noticing," the project pushes the genre of the atlas to offer "theoretically informed empirical

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attention to the anthropogenic transformation of land, air, and water." Curated and edited by three anthropologists and one architect, the collection presents the work of more than 100 artists, activists, and researchers from diverse communities. This transdisciplinary collaboration builds "bridges across lines of mutual unintelligibility." Using various modes like landscape illustrations, video poems, field reports, and interactive media, the collection offers "a compendium of vantage points" that nevertheless promise only a "patchy" understanding. Rather than offering readers thick description, the *Feral Atlas* offers them a multimodal experience of "thick absorption."

3. DISCIPLINARY RECONFIGURATIONS

In Section 2, I have argued that while multimodality became introduced from external frameworks, the term helps anthropologists address an array of contradictions inherent in the ethnographic enterprise. By infinitely expanding the forms of ethnography, multimodality challenges the primacy of textual representation without abandoning the many articulations of voice. By attuning an expanded sensorium to specific research contexts, multimodality challenges the assumptions about observational clarity without dismissing the multifaceted and embodied ways of seeing. By reflexively recognizing the indeterminant additive qualities of mediation, multimodality challenges the authenticity of immediacy without denying the technocentric shadow cast across our research pathways. Now that I have tried to establish how multimodality inflects our contemporary research practices through registers of formal experimentation, sensorial experience, and reflexive mediation, I turn to the way the term resonates across divergent genealogies in order to reframe stymied theoretical debates and outline infrastructural requirements for its disciplinary sustainability.

3.1. Dichotomies for the Unruly

In the oft-quoted sentiment that "anthropology is the most scientific of the humanities, and the most humanistic of the sciences" (attributed to Alfred Kroeber), the two superlative claims characterize centrifugal and centripetal forces, in which I imagine a form of uncontaminated positivism retracting inward against a splintering explosion of radical alterity. To sustain these disciplinary extremes in hybrid tension, as I think multimodality attempts to do, anthropology must recognize objectivity and subjectivity as a single cultural construct (Pels 2014, p. 217) while attempting to "reject both scientism and a purely aesthetic reductionism" (Herzfeld 2014). For their part, anthropologists have struggled to hold this dichotomizing impulse in balance, which indicates less a failure of perseverance than a problem with the model. When critiquing black-and-white distinctions, one typically evokes the ambiguous space in between in undifferentiated tones of gray, yet another kind of color purity. Instead, the kinds of differentiated multiplicity underlying these distinctions may be more accurately analogized by the kaleidoscopic combination of obscured fragments and overlapping patterns shifting and appearing in flashes of clarity and confusion (Westmoreland et al. 2022).

To best capture the debilitating influence of this dichotomization, I turn to the field of visual anthropology. Whereas a few decades ago Östör (1990, p. 722) decried the fatiguing redundancy of "the old debate about visual anthropology failing or succeeding," Vannini (2020, pp. 4–5) recently proclaimed that visual anthropology had finally moved beyond "tired debates and parochial arguments. . . by looking ahead toward diversity rather than behind toward conformity." These debates highlight the "unruly life" of a field saddled with a series of delimiting dichotomies (Ginsburg 1998, p. 173)—image/word, art/science, mind/body, participant/observer, self/other, form/content, and so on. For instance, in one of the earliest and most sustained efforts to establish robust visual methods in anthropology, Bateson & Mead (1942) deployed film and photography in rather divergent intellectual projects (Bateson et al. 1977). The division between

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Mead's empirical use as "a form of documentation" and Bateson's innovative use as "an analytical tool" foretells a seemingly irreconcilable split between two apparent histories of visual anthropology (Grimshaw 2001, p. 88; MacDougall 2005, p. 241). Whereas the first is characterized as institutionalized, disciplined, positivistic, and committed to data collection, the second appears autonomous, unruly, poetic, and premised on research creation.

It follows, then, that the history of institutionalizing "the visual" in anthropology begins with the integration of the field as a "subsidiary activity of anthropology" (MacDougall 2005, p. 239), in which Mead's commitment to salvage research contributed much to the professionalization of the field (Ruby 2002). Despite her repudiation of the "discipline of words" (Mead 1995), some doubted her interest in pictorial representations (de Brigard 1995, p. 26) considering "the lengths to which she goes to transform photographs into words" (Poole 2005). Indeed, a tension between the "excess of visual detail" and its "discursive insufficiency" would remain "an enduring paradox in the history of visual anthropology" (Griffiths 2002, p. 129). And early efforts to define ethnographic film highlight an anxiety about its scientific legitimacy (Grimshaw 2001, p. 88). Where Ruby's (1975) "Is an Ethnographic Film a Filmic Ethnography?" laid out and maintained a self-declared "narrowly conceived and restrictive conceptualization" (Ruby 2000, p. 6), Heider's (1971) *Ethnographic Film* provided a more fluid, albeit "largely circular" (MacDougall 2005, pp. 265–66), set of holistic criteria for assessing a film's "ethnographicness," premised on depicting whole bodies, whole people, and whole acts.[2]

In contrast, visual anthropology's second historical trajectory developed as a largely "autonomous and dissident enterprise" (MacDougall 2005, p. 239) that engaged in a history of "border crossings" with the art world, thereby stimulating "fertile collaborations," finding "deeper affinities," and accentuating "productive frictions" (Schneider & Wright 2006, pp. 1–3). As a case in point, several prominent figures in the canon of visual anthropology remain outliers in the discipline but are renowned artistically. For instance, Robert Gardner has left an expansive body of work that foregrounds a sustained exploration of the human condition through varying aesthetic experiments (Gardner & Östör 2001; Gardner 2006, 2007, 2010); however, many anthropologists argued that his approach to "just representations" belies a provocative, if not troubling, ethical stance (Mishler 1985, Parry 1988, Ruby 1991). More successful, Jean Rouch remains a cornerstone of both visual anthropology and film studies; however, mainstream anthropology rarely recognizes his use of reflexive and collaborative practices years before they took hold in written ethnographies (Stoller 1992, Loizos 1993, Feld 2003, ten Brink 2007, Henley 2010).

The tension within these histories took on a new opposition during a push in the late 1990s to rethink the orientation of visual anthropology toward the interrelated fields of anthropology of art, visual studies, and media anthropology; however, this reorientation betrayed an anxiety that ethnographic filmmaking might "all too easily lead students away from anthropology" (Banks & Morphy 1997, p. 5). The reorientation offered a model for expanding the scope of the field at the expense of its central practice. Countercritiques denounced the shift from producing visual ethnographies toward an analysis of representational systems as a replacement of a constitutively visual anthropology for merely "an anthropology *of* the visual" (Taylor 1998, p. 536; emphasis in original).

In contrast, MacDougall (2005, p. 217) "proposes a much more radical break with anthropological modes of discourse," suggesting that visual anthropology constitutes a separate discipline with a fundamentally different epistemology premised on ways of knowing "that lie on the edge of language" (Grimshaw 2007, p. 131). Noting the lack of any actual principles in the foundational

[2] Friedman (2020) revisits these criteria to offer an updated corrective.

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Principles of Visual Anthropology (Hockings 1995), MacDougall (2005, pp. 270–72) advanced three "new principles" that foreground sensorial sensibilities, including (*a*) methodological frameworks that utilize "the distinctive expressive structures" of audiovisual media, rather than approaches derived from verbal or quantitative modes of inquiry; (*b*) epistemological frameworks open to more perceptual and affective forms of knowledge, rather than propositional and logical principles; and (*c*) conceptual frameworks engaged with topographical, temporal, corporeal, and personal aspects of human experience. MacDougall's (1998, 2005) corporeal epistemology opened the field beyond the discipline while also becoming the touchstone for a generation of visual anthropologists. Uninspired by tired disciplinary debates, the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) at Harvard University championed a constitutively audio/visual anthropology by seeking out alternative venues of validation for their empirical aesthetics. Renowned for its expansive array of productions at the doctoral and professorial ranks, SEL's filmic, sonic, and exhibitory works have found recognition at major film festivals, biennials, and art museums (MacDonald 2013, Lee 2019).

As new video technologies became more accessible and visual culture offered a more inclusive reframing of art history (Mirzoeff 1999, Dikovitskaya 2005), the past two decades have seen a resurgence of cross-border interactions among practice-based fields like art, design, and ethnography (Schneider & Wright 2010, p. 5). Despite disciplinary policing trying to internally limit experimentation within visual anthropology (Grimshaw & Ravetz 2005, p. 3), its unruly resistance to institutionalization (Ginsberg 1998) continually opened the subdiscipline as "an important space for experimentation" (Grimshaw 2001, p. 3). Whereas visual anthropologists exhibit "an unusual commitment to practice—and to *improvisatory practice*" (Grimshaw et al. 2010, p. 149; emphasis in original), Sansi (2015) finds artists and anthropologists productively dialoguing around "social practice" as expressions of Maussian gift theory. And yet, Lee (2019) argues that the recurrent tension between discursivity and aesthetics—"between 'showing much' and 'revealing little'"—continues to reduce the debate to a singular ethico-aesthetic spectrum without attention to other intersecting tensions, such as rich/poor images and light/heavy media.

As the observational corporality helped open new epistemological registers, some visual anthropologists began advocating for the disruptive features of montage in order to utilize nonrepresentational approaches to evoke the invisible (Marcus 1994; Suhr & Willerslev 2012, 2013). This use of juxtaposition and fragmentation resonates with various promises for a "different kind of ethnography" (Elliott & Culhane 2016), even if "incomplete, unfinished and not-yet-ready" (Schneider & Wright 2010, p. 20). Working with, rather than on, uncertainty and ambiguity, Yalori (2018) situates data collection and research creation in an enduring echo of the "hierarchical separation" between the arts and science, "reality and imagination." As uncertainty also opens to new possibilities, Pink et al. (2018) seek "creative, hopeful and speculative modes of understanding." Extending the exchange of roles anthropologists have taken—as artist (Foster 1995) and scenographer (Hegel et al. 2019)—Elhaik (2016) proposes the curatorial as a new mode of anthropological work, in which the ethnographer learns the curatorial skills for managing "the micropolitics of mediating between institutions, communities and all kinds of different agents" (Sansi 2020, p. 7) without succumbing to the proclivities of the art world or merely serving as gatekeepers.

If visual anthropology has moved beyond tired either/or debates and toward diversity as suggested, then multimodality responds to this invitation by drawing together various sense- (Howes 2005) and media-related fields (Porcello et al. 2010) and their empirical practices of sensory attunement and research creation. And yet, this collectivizing gesture hints at an enduring identity crisis. While visual anthropology has now become increasingly recognized within the discipline and broadly cited beyond it, proponents suggest that "no one knows quite what it is" (MacDougall 1998, p. 61). Divergent histories have shaped visual anthropology into many configurations: "as a research technique, . . . a field of study, . . . a teaching tool, . . . a means of publication, [or] a new

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approach to anthropological knowledge" (MacDougall 1998, p. 63). With its name "something of a misnomer" (Grimshaw et al. 2010, p. 149), a recurrent search for an adequate replacement name resounds through this institutional history, including visual communication (Gross & Ruby 2013), visual ethnography (Postma & Crawford 2006), graphic anthropology or anthropography (Ingold 2013, p. 129), and audiovisual anthropology or sensory anthropology (Schneider & Wright 2010, p. 15), among others. Even if visual anthropology has been the most prominent alternative to a "writing culture" framework and offers "a more explicitly elaborated metadiscourse than do anthropologies of the other senses" (Porcello et al. 2010), these debates show that the field cannot sustain its project of expanding anthropological ways of knowing without diversifying its modes of inquiry. While the polysemic affordances of multimodality offer visual anthropology a more expansive nomenclature, multimodality is not reducible to any one subdiscipline but rather signals a much broader invitation.

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3.2. Multimodality for an Anthropological Otherwise

As evidenced in numerous workshops, roundtables, installations, exhibitions, and walking tours at conferences both physically and virtually over the past few years (Takaragawa et al. 2020), multimodality has gained increasing institutional attention. Indeed, the multimodal discourse has expanded and drawn into its growing gravitational orbit some of the discipline's most prominent journals and spawned new ones that offer "prototypes for a multimodal future" (Boyer et al. 2016, p. 461). For instance, Nolas & Varvantakis (2018, p. 1) self-initiated the launch of the online, open-access, and open-peer-review journal *Entanglements: Experiments in Multimodal Ethnography*, which characterized the nascent field as "a knotting and twisting of different modes of knowledge generation, and of the intersecting and enmeshment of media of production, representation and consumption of lived experience." The editors advanced reflexive attention to the sensory and embodied ways that ethnography collapses the analytical distance between researchers and their objects of study (Varvantakis & Nolas 2019).

Perhaps more notably, the decision by *American Anthropologist* (*AA*) in 2017 to rebrand its Visual Anthropology Forum as Multimodal Anthropologies may signal a discernible break from the delimiting subdiscipline as noted in Section 3.1, but *AA*'s "invitation" (Collins et al. 2017b) also welcomed a broader set of enduring and emergent concerns in the discipline. The intellectual project behind this rebranding reflects the convergence of two collaborative initiatives, each highlighting the way diverse audiovisual and social media platforms extend opportunities to engage in public anthropology. Hailing from Towson University, the inaugural Multimodal Anthropologies section editors had previously articulated a "networked anthropology" based on emerging media practices and expanding digital ecologies (Collins & Durington 2014), while their predecessors (colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania) laid the groundwork to "explore new directions" within and beyond visual anthropology (Jackson et al. 2014, p. 649). When promoted to Editor-in-Chief of *AA*, Thomas (2017, p. 10) combined these agendas by both overseeing the rebranding of the forum and highlighting the need to address the expanded role of media in ethnographic research with its technological affordances, sensory engagements, and participatory ethos, as well as the need to engage "longstanding anthropological concerns like discursive authority, critical reflexivity, and creative representation."

These initiatives have provided a common framework for reconceptualizing a diverse constellation of practice-based research approaches and creating new spaces for broader conversations to shape the contours of this emergent field. Importantly, Takaragawa et al. (2019) critiqued the overly celebratory rhetoric of the multimodal invitation as "bad habitus," sensing that proponents seemed to ascribe inherently democratic qualities to new technologies while ignoring how they

are bolstered by infrastructures of extraction at the root of long-standing social injustices. Accordingly, they flipped the appellation to advance an "anthropology of multimodality" that would reflexively foreground the impact of a technocentric framework on anthropological research.

By the time Chin (2021, p. 5) took the helm of *AA*, current events—post-truth populism, ecological crises, and persistent racial and gender injustice—made it "clear that we simply cannot continue to operate the journal in ways that assume the old ideals of academia are the norm, either in form or content." In contrast to the more optimistic "invitation," the new section editors (two of whom studied under Jackson, Thomas, and Wortham at the University of Pennsylvania) issued an "ambivalent manifesto" (Alvarez Astacio et al. 2021, p. 421):

> Rather than pivoting on false binaries, an ambivalent multimodality recognizes and critiques the ways in which the digital (re)produces neocolonial forms of extraction, exclusion, inequality, and representational problematics. Yet, an ambivalent multimodality... also seeks to open spaces of hope and speculative possibility... all the while staying with the reflexive recognition of knowing that we are, in multiple ways, complicit.

Deploying an "aesthetics of accountability" (Ginsburg 2018), these academic debates highlight the problematics of incommensurability that obscure understanding an "otherwise" (Lea & Povinelli 2018, Wander 2018). Whereas words like collaboration and consultation may replay neocolonial power relations and become the "red man's burden" (Mithlo 2004), such "keywords" unproblematically frame such relationships as morally recognizable to Western audiences (Lea & Povinelli 2018). While previous critiques of ethnographic media (Trinh 1991, Rony 1996, Russell 1999, Marks 2000) find renewed purpose in these assessments (Jackson 2012, Gill 2021), collaborative models can also bring "different worlds into relationship" by remixing foreign modes with "local values, aesthetics, and histories" (Miyarrka Media 2019, p. 11). And intervention models in design anthropology (Murphy 2016) and practice-based approaches (van Dienderen et al. 2019) help undergird more explicitly decolonizing projects that offer "speculative futures beyond whiteness" (Chin 2017).

These political positions demand a reschooling of our senses, not only to perceive nuances in the so-called natural world but also to reflexively recognize affective disturbances within anthropomorphized landscapes. While anthropologists can attune their awareness and enskill their senses, perception remains uniquely situational (Haraway 1988). As with any disadvantaged perspective, privileged outsiders cannot see "through Navajo eyes" (Worth & Adair 1997, Peterson 2013). And the ethnographic gaze both engenders and remains incompatible with second sight, that "peculiar sensation... of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 2004, p. 2). Instead, indigenous media offers a "parallax" perspective (Ginsburg 1995), which might nonetheless prove "disorienting... to the noninitiated" (Dattatreyan & Marrero-Guillamón 2019, p. 224). Rather than empirical certainties, "making sense" of violent histories may require both strategies of obfuscation (Westmoreland 2013, Dattatreyan & Marrero-Guillamón 2021) and alternative sensory frameworks that challenge us to "listen to images" (Campt 2017, Shankar 2019).

While display cases, storerooms, digital catalogs, and other archival forms offer ample opportunities to advance critical object lessons (Geismar 2018), remix expedition content (Karel & Kusumaryati 2020), and surface obscured voices (Glass & Hunt 2019), some of the most poignant efforts to decolonize museum collections simply restructure the existing logics of categorization (Povinelli 2011, Geismar 2018). Despite the increasing bureaucratization of data management and research ethics (Pels et al. 2018, Dilger et al. 2019), anthropologists increasingly push for collaboration to ensure that frameworks of data management remain recognizable and accessible to partner communities. As anthropology grapples with these circumstances, an emergent

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multimodal stance will be driven by subjunctive questions like "What do we want anthropology to resemble?" (Shankar 2018).

3.3. Infrastructures for a Multimodal Messiness

Beyond the dyadic flatness of native/ethnographer or even the expanded geometry of the research triangle (native/ethnographer/audience), multimodality offers a different shape for anthropology. Recognizing how ethnographic creation is already happening in para-sites among a range of actors (Marcus 2000) and the general "messy" entanglement of research relationships (Law 2004), multimodality opens opportunities for anthropologists to reimagine their remit, but also demands intensive human labor and social infrastructure to thrive. While multimodal initiatives pushing for collaborative experimentations (Sanchez-Criado & Estalella 2018) renew earlier calls for a "shared anthropology" (Rouch 1995, Ginsburg 1996), there is a growing awareness of the burden levied on young anthropologists learning to navigate toxic relationships within the discipline, particularly around white rational masculinity (Davidov 2018). Despite the critique of the single author presenting discursive authority, there is also recognition of the isolation, loneliness, and possible despair that may accompany the ominous demands of tenure review and the precarity of the publish-or-perish paradigm.

There is a growing recognition that the analytic labor of a "thinking body" needs the contemplative freedom to oscillate between confusion and clarity (Ballestero & Winthereik 2021). And because the classroom constitutes the main audience for many anthropologists, we must balance the affordances of digital media with the way corporate educational technology follows students into their pockets. As demands for efficiency meet increasingly technologized processes, there is mounting evidence that our sensoria respond poorly to the speeding up of learning environments (Berg & Seeber 2016). Within this high-pressure context, multimodality presents both the possibility for a different kind of academic anthropology and the burden of breaking down destructive norms (Nagoski & Nagoski 2020). In order for multimodality to shift how research is performed, presented, and evaluated, proponents will need to overhaul multiple layers of infrastructure that support the key areas of training, dissemination, and assessment.

First, as multimodal practices include the mundane ways that mediating methodologies, epistemologies, and ontologies shape anthropology, proponents suggest that multimodality "does not necessitate the acquisition of an entirely new skill set, or investment in the latest high-tech gadgets and media equipment, or even membership in a particular group or society" (Collins et al. 2017b, pp. 145–46). Having said that, suggestions that media-literate and tech-savvy students are already equipped to perform multimodal research obfuscate the importance of technical and methodological training. A shoestring approach obscures the value of enduring and emergent infrastructures necessary to advance, defend, and secure multimodal commitments, never mind various failed efforts to build and sustain institutional support. For instance, compared with the limited resources and support available for visual anthropology, sonic training remains even weaker (Feld & Brenneis 2004, Porcello et al. 2010). Furthermore, despite the integration of digital practices in all aspects of our lives, visual technologies are "all too often deployed with little technological proficiency, and even less theoretical and ethical considerations" (Marion & Crowder 2013, p. xiii; see also Banks 2001, p. 2). As such, while embracing the potential for amateur engagements, multimodality requires pedagogical infrastructures that support relevant techno-methodological training.

Second, as formal venues for multimodal outputs and engaged scholarly validation remain limited, the professional imperative for relevancy and impact means that anthropologists must compete in new ways to get work noticed among a proliferation of media content (Wesch 2008, Verstappen 2020). While an increasing number of academic platforms have begun to embrace

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promises of the digital age, the academic publishing industry has been slow to accommodate media-rich content and reluctant to develop and maintain dynamic platforms. Although promising "to create an epistemic infrastructure rather than a series of one-offs" (Boyer et al. 2016, p. 461), overhead for such projects must be justified by the prerogative of rotating editors (Choi et al. 2019). And while *AA* provides a prominent venue to debate the affordances of multimodality, many earlier precedents laid the groundwork for this flourishing scene (e.g., *Sensate: A Journal for Experiments in Critical Media Practices*, *Ethnographic Terminalia*, *#Colleex: Collaboratory for Ethnographic Experimentation*). Despite the challenges, proponents are expanding multimodal priorities to open access (Pia et al. 2020), open peer review (Nolas & Varvantakis 2019), affirmative citational structures (see **https://www.citeblackwomencollective.org**), and the enduring affordances of image/text page design (Sadre-Orafai & McDonald 2020).

Third, while multimodality has space for both technical and aesthetic skillfulness and playful amateur experimentation, this complicates models of validation straddling artistic expression and research rigor. As anthropologists increasingly turn toward experimental and sensorial modalities to generate new forms of epistemic results, the conventions of scholarly evaluation rooted in discursive transpositions of lived reality remain poorly suited for the job. While these trends have the potential to address the hierarchies of scholarly publication, a multimodal approach "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" (Collins et al. 2017b, p. 144). Although discussions of multimodal validation typically devolve into queries about "how to get work to count," Chio (2017) argues that a more fundamental question asks how "these elements make our scholarship (more) intelligible[.]" However, when faced with work that deviates from models of intelligibility, critics may find themselves in a hermeneutic short circuit that privileges conventional human-centered readings (Westmoreland & Luvaas 2015). If such outputs are to become common practice, then it is imperative to develop comparable analytical skills to discuss and evaluate them (Criado et al. 2022). Whereas earlier precedents for assessing ethnographic film provide an important framework for evaluating and engaging the new modes of research creation and scholarly output, cultivating a multimodal paradigm will require sustained efforts by a critical mass of anthropologists to learn how to "read" and assess peers' work.

As a final case in point, photography presents a variety of multimodal dilemmas. At the nexus of stringent privacy laws and the proliferation of everyday imaging habits, photography is the source of both great anxiety and habituated thoughtlessness. Long treated as an optica non grata in anthropology, "photography might seem too compromised to invest in as a form of ethnographic output" (Ferrarini & Scaldaferri 2020, p. 170). Aside from Bateson & Mead's (1942) encyclopedic *Balinese Character* and Collier's (1967) handbook on photography as a research method, plus later editions coauthored with his son (e.g., Collier & Collier 1986), photography had remained mostly in the hands of sociologists making visual essays (Pauwels 2015, pp. 139–66). Whereas filmmaking has long dominated the training, productions, and discourse of visual anthropology, photography has returned to anthropology in rigorous ways with handbooks (Marion & Crowder 2013), exhibitions (Vium 2016), photo blogs (Luvaas 2016a,b), photo essays (Hoffman 2012, Sutherland 2016), photo magazines (Campbell et al. 2022), and photo books, often made in collaborations between photographers and writers (Bourgois & Schonberg 2009, De Boeck & Baloji 2016, O'Neill & Fogarty-Valenzuela 2020). Driven by its everyday ubiquity and advancing imaging technologies, photography has reemerged as a versatile and accessible mode for enacting powerful visual narratives. To effectively bolster this practice, anthropologists would do well to consider how photography "compellingly challenge[s] a viewer's way of seeing" and its presentation deserves careful attention to "the role of design and the limitations of our publishing infrastructure" (Choi et al. 2019).

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4. THE SHAPE OF A POSSIBLE ANTHROPOLOGY

By recognizing modes of communication beyond or in addition to text, reflexively engaging the research tool kit, corporeally interfacing with sensory modalities, and enacting relationships across multiple media platforms, multimodalists have prioritized alternative ways of knowing, decolonizing the discipline, reconfiguring research and peer relationships, imagining the ontological otherwise, and giving shape to a "possible [multimodal] anthropology" (Pandian 2019). But if multimodal anthropology is to avoid the traps of either visual anthropology or writing culture, it will require sustained efforts to bolster infrastructures supple enough to accommodate radically different ideas and practices of anthropology. A multimodal anthropology will recognize the resourcefulness of matter at hand while demanding material resources from institutions, the intelligible potency of intellectual prose while exploring a spectrum of presentation modalities, the despotism of the eye while cultivating an attuned sensorium, the important struggles of collaboration while cherishing moments for quiet introspection, the student interest in creative research while cultivating spaces for research creation at the doctoral and postdoctoral levels, the proliferation of digital platforms available for research dissemination while demanding robust epistemic infrastructures of peer review and validation, and the kaleidoscopic shaping of ethnographic experience while resisting geometric reductionism. Multimodality thus offers anthropologists a radically different inflection for how to pay attention in these entangled times.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe much gratitude to Igor Boog, John Boy, Jenny Chio, Jennifer Deger, Federico De Musso, Benjamin Fogarty-Valenzuela, Sander Hölsgens, David Kloos, Andrew Littlejohn, Peter Pels, Ildikó Plájás, Metje Postma, Janine Prins, Francesco Ragazzi, Jasmijn Rana, Arjun Shankar, Patsy Spyer, Peter Snowdon, Emiko Stock, Kiven Strohm, Koen Suidgeest, Shirley van der Maarel, Sanderien Verstappen, and two anonymous reviewers, whose collective feedback immeasurably sharpened my thinking and improved this text.

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