

## VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

### Interview

# Curating Ambivalence: An Interview with Erica Lehrer, Concordia University

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**Jane Lief Abell (JLA):** What made you choose anthropology? Did it have anything to do with your interest in photography?

**Erica Lehrer (EL):** I chose anthropology because I wanted to be able to tell good stories that came from sustained attention to small things. I hoped—and still hope—that seeing how individuals (and also objects) are constrained and enabled by the larger social and cultural forces that they are caught up in can create both critical consciousness and empathetic understanding. Photography was an early tool that helped justify my desire to observe and analyze the world around me. I grew up with parents who developed and printed their own photos, so looking closely at the social and material world was part of my upbringing, which I later pursued on my own. My mom liked to take surreptitious photos of couples kissing; my dad preferred seaweed and rusty nails.

My earliest attempts to document, make sense of, and communicate about what would later become my dissertation fieldwork (and then my book *Jewish Poland Revisited: Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places* [2013]) was through photography—photo essays, and later exhibits, which included field notes and then some material artifacts I had collected during fieldwork. The impetus for making exhibitions grew out of a few parallel realizations. First, I began to see that the topic of my research, namely Jewish heritage brokering in Poland, was a source of great dispute among the people whose cultural imaginaries it implicated. I felt like I needed to be in conversation with these broader audiences—foreign Jews and local Poles (including some Jews)—alongside the ostensibly primary goal of writing for other anthropologists. I was also struggling to capture and transmit what for me was the peculiarity of the forms that “Jewish culture” was taking. These included wooden figurines of Jews and “kosher” vodka in bottles with caricatured Jews on the labels and also the particular aesthetic of the urban landscape—atavistic, candlelit cafes with “Jewish” food

and klezmer music, while outside one could see the gashes in the doorframes where *mezuzahs* (Jewish prayer boxes) had been torn away during or after World War II, and then the tour guides and groups—both Jewish and not—passing in and out, and so on.

I wanted to communicate the slightly surreal and highly emotional quality of this atmosphere and how fraught it was for me and other foreign Jews who stumbled across it, as well as the ways local Jews were finding meaningful uses for it. Finally, it was dawning on me that some of the images I had been making as evidence of the commodification of Jewish heritage in Poland were too simplistic and overdetermined and were easily misread. They needed to be framed within multiple overlapping contexts: international flows of traumatic and sometimes highly ideological tourism, understandings and misunderstandings of both historical and present-day contexts, and other issues that affected how they were seen. I suddenly asked myself, for example, why I was photographing in black and white? It was in part an unconscious inability to deal with Poland as having a present-day existence; for me (and many foreign Jews), Poland was an almost-sacred touchstone for the mythic past. So I began to both include more artifacts, and sometimes sound and video, and one time even food and an actual Polish tour guide to lead visitors through the exhibit. I also exhibited my photos surrounded by scraps of my field notes that revealed my own slowly expanding consciousness—my process of learning, questioning, second-guessing myself, and being challenged by Polish people about my own ways of framing what I saw. I’ve continued to pursue a strategy of curating ambivalence.

**JLA:** How would you describe your approach to visual anthropology? Where did it come from? How were you trained?

**EL:** I wasn’t driven to pursue photography very deeply from a technical standpoint. But the process of taking photos gave me a kind of distance and time to consider my own habits of seeing. It was useful to look at what I chose to photograph over time and what kind of meaning I was deducing and reproducing in my photos. I started to realize the extent to which I was part of a whole class of people (memory tourists) who were taking and circulating similar photographs and therefore buttressing and disseminating particular meanings. These meanings were in many ways projected as much as encountered. It was an invaluable ethnographic experience.



FIGURE 1. *Odpowiedz . . . please respond installation, Kraków, Poland, 2008. (Courtesy of Erica Lehrer)*

Watching visitors to Poland take photographs, and watching locals watching them, sensitized me to the predetermined ways we look at the world. It made me realize the importance of always widening the viewfinder and including ourselves in the frame. If we're reading culture over the shoulder of some local folks (to borrow from Geertz's imperfect metaphor), there's always someone behind us, reading our behaviors over our shoulders as well. The social aspect of photography helped me think about the ways in which we are all always all looking at each other.

Regarding what inspires my present work, to the extent that I was "trained," it was mostly as a close observer, question asker, listener, and "translator" of what I saw and heard back and forth across social boundaries. That's what I sought from graduate school in anthropology, at any rate. It had been the part of my undergraduate anthropology degree that most excited and inspired me: actually observing social life and interviewing people and trying afterward to contextualize and explain how you understood what you saw and heard, and all the limitations of that understanding. I always struggled with the disciplinary boundaries of anthropology as it was conventionally taught. As an undergrad (at Grinnell College in Iowa), I created independent study courses to incorporate photography into my curriculum. Once I arrived at the University of Michigan for grad school, I felt the need to supplement the mostly theoretical and analytical work offered in my program with courses in creative nonfiction (in the MFA program) and documentary storytelling (in the Fine Arts faculty), and then I also completed a new Museum Studies certificate program that Michigan had just inaugurated in my final year when I was defending my dissertation.

The point was how to tell better, fuller, more complex and honest stories that illuminated more layers and more perspectives; to make better, if always-flawed and partial attempts to document "culture" and its manifestations in individual and broader collective lives. And to do so in these multiplying and increasingly public contexts. Over

the years of doing dissertation fieldwork, it quickly became clear that the challenge was no longer just "what happens when 'they' read what I write?", which was part of what the "Writing Culture" crisis had bequeathed to my cohort of grad students, but a situation where "they" are already blogging about my project or are writing anthropology dissertations about tourists like me. One of my so-called "key informants" in the field—a fabulous Jewish heritage tour guide—actually became a fellow grad student in Polish-Jewish History at Michigan. So now who is "they"? The question then sort of became "what can we all do together?" Which led me toward curating. But more on that below.

The most important grad school seminar I took was Ruth Behar's Ethnographic Writing workshop. Ruth got us to go beyond critique—which we were all getting groomed to do more and more trenchantly—and to confront the fact that we would each have to actually go out and produce an ethnographic monograph ourselves. She gave us writing assignments that forced us to think through our own ways of seeing. She asked us questions like "what kind of observer are you?" and "what kind of dilemmas does this disposition pose for your work?" She also challenged us to let theory develop organically from questions posed by the real-life struggles of those we encounter in the field rather than trying to impose the fashionable theories of the moment. And good description, of course, is often very visual but also—as Ruth stressed—emotional. Your own sensitivities and memories inform your ways of seeing the places where you do research and the people living there. How to communicate the sense of place of your field site, how to get beyond yourself to local experience while acknowledging that you can't ever discard your own lens? Ruth created a very supportive, engaged seminar environment where we had to write for each other each week and give truly constructive criticism. Creating is so much more daunting than critiquing, particularly when you're critiquing published ethnographies by authors who aren't in the room, without a sense of their challenges.



FIGURE 2. *Odpowiedz . . . please respond* installation, Kraków, Poland, 2008. (Courtesy of Erica Lehrer)

At this point, my approach to “visual anthropology” (if we can call it that) is completely eclectic. I simply don’t want to exclude any means of communication that may open up a given ethnographic research scenario for consideration, “inhabitation,” or dialogue. With curating (at least in physical space), the challenge is to create a *mise-en-scène* that visitors can enter into in a meaningful way. That’s the wonderful thing about curating and about museological space: it creates an opportunity for a kind of rarefied contemplative encounter. Taking things, including objects, documents, behaviors, interactions, even other people—in the form of visitors—out of the flow of quotidian life and restaging them in gallery space makes them newly visible and lets us literally “muse” on them in ways that are less likely to happen in the hectic time–space of everyday life. Exhibitions are a great means, for example, of amassing things that are dispersed in or across societies and so make their generally invisible proliferation visible. But I’m intrigued by “vernacular” curating as well, where you use exhibitionary techniques to frame everyday life in the sites where it normally unfolds.

I rely heavily on collaboration to make my experiments happen. My projects have been developed with an expanding network of Polish (and other) photographers, filmmakers, web architects, exhibition designers, and so on, not to mention wonderful student volunteers local to both my home and field sites. And it goes without saying that none of the projects would have been possible if the relationships with my core interlocutors in the field, the culture brokers whose work I’ve written about, had not helped me in the most diverse of ways. Every project challenge—from where to get glue to how to solve delicate local political crises—has been solved with the insider insights and connections of the owners of a tiny bookshop in Kraków, who many years ago adopted me in classic fieldwork fashion.

**JLA:** Do you teach visual anthropology to students? If so, what do you most fundamentally want your students to get out of such courses?

**EL:** In my present job, I don’t teach anthropology at all per se; I’m in a history department with a strong public history component (Concordia University in Montreal). In that context, I have a recurring interdisciplinary seminar called “Curating Difficult Knowledge,” as well as an undergrad course, “Museums and Heritage in a Globalized World,” in which I use curating as a teaching tool. Or to be more specific, variations on a process of “curatorial dreaming” where students have to pick a specific museum or potentially a vernacular cultural setting, critically analyze it, and devise a constructive intervention to “re-curate” it. The goal is to involve students not only in the academic study of culture, history, and arts in public sites but also in the development of ideas for “counter-exhibits” linked to them, to experiment with developing more democratic approaches to museum exhibitions and heritage sites rather than only critiquing them. I encourage students to make criticism quite literally constructive by linking it with creation.

**JLA:** Describe the Centre for Ethnographic Research and Exhibition in the Aftermath of Violence (CEREV), which you direct (<http://cerev.concordia.ca>). You have written that you founded CEREV as a space for the production of “new knowledge around issues of culture and identity in the aftermath of violence.” What is your approach to this work? Do you see CEREV as uniquely anthropological or as a fundamentally interdisciplinary project?

**EL:** We’re actually in the process of expanding the mandate of our physical lab space beyond the link with histories of violence to attract a broader array of users at the intersection of public scholarship and curatorial practice. The lab allows faculty and students to use both digital and analog technologies to experiment with exhibiting their



FIGURE 3. *Souvenir, Talisman, Toy exhibition, Kraków, Poland, 2013. (Courtesy of Erica Lehrer)*

research rather than only publishing it in textual form. CEREV came about because the History Department at Concordia hired me to fill a Canada Research Chair position, whose goal was to synergize existing strengths in the department, namely histories of violence and public history. Concordia has made a big push for engaging in experimental research and with new technologies, and I was drawn to the idea of a collaborative, constructive form of “humanities lab,” a term I first heard in a little article in *Inside Higher Ed* by academic writing coach Gina Hiatt. She not only lamented scholarly isolation but also praised the way new ideas are generated from the kind of ongoing, low-stakes collective experimentation and daily banter that is the norm in the hard sciences. CEREV is a fundamentally interdisciplinary project. But since it was established by an anthropologist with a museum studies background, and I had already been engaged in experimental curating related to my own ethnographic fieldwork data, I thought I could best create a lab that added a museological component to what the department and broader university offered. I wanted to create a community of people around me who were similarly interested in curating their empirically based social and cultural research.

I began in response to the calls for experimentalism that came in the wake of the Writing Culture debates—an impulse that is also present in my writing. For me this took the form of self-reflexivity, multiple perspectives, and attention to the salience of emotional realities. It also gave me permission to put some emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of the story, to allow or really to try to draw in a broader group of readers than might otherwise pick up an ethnography. I wanted the people to whom my topic mattered, people in the various “field sites” my work traversed, to read it.

But moving from the written page to the multidimensional, social space of an exhibit was experimentation of a

different order. That’s a methodological shift toward a kind of theorizing in the concrete, which simultaneously provides an emergent “scenario” for further fieldwork (to use George Marcus’s term). It’s also an interesting way of challenging the unidirectionality of so-called “public scholarship” or “knowledge mobilization” (as Canadian funding bodies have come to call what used to be spoken of as “research dissemination”) toward more complex collaborative models. An exhibition of a certain interactive kind provides a situation where you can draw a diversity of people together to actively debate—and help define—a particular domain of subject matter, and to engage with the anthropologist’s propositions about it, and in this way contribute to the ongoing process of theorizing.

**JLA:** Tell us about your own media making: Is it different from (or similar to) your approach to writing up ethnographic data for readers?

**EL:** My own ongoing curatorial project (or projects, really) has set the general paradigm of what I’ve been trying to get others to experiment with as well. It represents an extended, open-ended, multi-platform engagement that grew out of very specific conditions in my field site in Kraków, Poland. In *Jewish Poland Revisited*, I describe a medieval Jewish urban quarter that was violently emptied of Jews during the Nazi occupation and that has been gentrified post-1989 in a grassroots surge of activity around Poland’s Jewish heritage.

My attention was drawn by some unexpected opportunities for interethnic encounter and dialogue that were enabled by this highly curated heritage space. Jewishness here had found a set of caretakers or “culture brokers” (to use a term that anthropologist Richard Kurin of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival has offered for this kind of activity). Certainly this was a space where Jewishness was commodified for consumption by visitors—and largely at the hands of non-Jews, to boot. But there was a vast domain



FIGURE 4. *Souvenir, Talisman, Toy* exhibition, Kraków, Poland, 2013. (Courtesy of Erica Lehrer)

of experience that exceeded the terms of mercenary exchange. I was interested in both what was being enabled by this “Jewish space” that had suddenly emerged as well as what its limitations were. I started thinking about what role I could play here, how I could be in productive dialogue with what local people had started. I wanted to amplify the critical aspects of their work so it was more accessible for other outsiders, particularly other Jewish visitors to Poland like myself, and help create more entryways to broaden the debate. I also wanted to highlight, frame, and “translate” certain aspects of this less-than-obvious domain of what was, at least in part, a form of and most certainly the setting for meaningful cultural critique.

I began with small “vernacular” interventions in my field site, like working with graphic designer Hannah Smotrich in 2005 to create a set of postcards and maps that used quotes from my interviews and field notes that we then distributed in local tourist venues. We played off of the particular genre of printed material that made sense in a tourist landscape to try to make another landscape—an interior cultural, psychological, and emotional landscape—visible, as well as to correct some common assumptions and answer some questions that visitors often repeated. I wanted to reflect back for people the shared, culturally inflected quality of some of the questions themselves and to give visitors a chance to see how their own tourist practices appeared to locals and vice versa. I wanted to help each side understand the other a bit better.

In 2008 I did a project at a Krakow’s annual Jewish festival, where I worked with Smotrich again, as well as sound artist Stephanie Rowden, to create an installation that formed a space of intimate thinking, writing, and discussion—a kind of collective mind of the festival itself. The festival was the object of scrutiny, and the installation was a place where festivalgoers could consider what

they were doing, why the festival existed, what unspoken traumas, assumptions, ghosts, and politics were circulating just beneath the surface of the celebratory hubbub (see <http://www.conversationmaps.org/odpowiedz/>).

And then in 2013, I negotiated an opportunity to do a formal exhibit in the city’s Seweryn Udziela Ethnographic Museum, a 19th-century institution also in the quarter, which happens to have a collection of Jewish folk figurines (made by non-Jews). These are similar to figurines sold at the nearby tourist shops but disavowed by the museum’s curators as worth considering in a shared frame with what they see as their “authentic” collection. I mixed things up to highlight the problematic nature of both the figurines and the museum’s system of classification, which inscribed an ethnonational boundary around Polish culture as essentially Catholic.

Despite the enormous input of time and resources, due to the controversial nature of the exhibit, it was only permitted to be up for about 20 days around the Jewish Culture Festival. But the visitor response and media interest was incredible, so I realized it would be a lost opportunity to let it go at that. I wanted to create an enduring trace that could be used as a prompt for a broader discussion and perhaps as a teaching tool. I published a book version of the exhibit and also an online version (including the media and visitor responses) that you can see at <http://www.luckyjews.com>. The web, and particularly social media, were already core components of how the project was realized, a pragmatic choice given that I was living in Canada while curating an exhibit in Poland. My Montreal-based students were working together with Polish students via a Facebook group to source and discuss exhibit materials. And we created a trilingual (Polish, English, and Hebrew) crowdsourcing website, <http://www.jewishfigs.pl>, to see if we could get Poles, Jews, and others—wherever they lived in the



FIGURE 5. *Souvenir, Talisman, Toy exhibition, Kraków, Poland, 2013.* (Courtesy of Erica Lehrer)

world—to send in photos and information about the figurines they owned, documented in their “natural habitats.” That was only partially successful, although we did get some very valuable materials. The students were leagues more digital media savvy than I am, so they got a whole social media aspect of the project churning on Facebook and Twitter as we ramped up toward the exhibit. It was amazing to see how word got out and connected people that way. If your goal is to generate public engagement and debate, this can be a really powerful tool. But social media is also exhausting. I mostly left that part to the younger set.

I also have a next step in the works to continue building on my local collaborative work in ways that open and extend this museum (and eventually others, I hope) outward for broader public participation and debate in Poland more broadly, including its Jewish diaspora. It’s part of a larger, comparative, grant-funded project with Canadian colleagues called “Thinking through the Museum.” We’re all committed to the kinds of extended relationship building (with lots of time for layered, informative failures) that Ray Silverman (2014) has recently coined “slow museology.” Another inspiration is public scholarship theorist Julie Ellison’s championing of “the project” as a salient new unit of collaborative public humanities production.

**JLA:** Please describe some of the projects in which CEREV is currently involved or highlight a few exhibitions, creators, or events that you feel represent the center and its goals.

**EL:** Regarding other CEREV projects, many of them have been linked to teaching, although we increasingly host groups that have used the physical space of the lab to prototype concrete exhibition ideas, like an installation exploring the experience and treatment of HIV/AIDS in different local contexts or an exhibition of art relating to Mexican

narco-trafficking, or the TUG collective’s travelling public immigration intervention, *Who Eats at Taco Bell?* A group of us created installations for the Ethnographic Terminalia show at the annual AAA meeting in Montreal in 2011 (see <http://ethnographicterminalia.org/2011-montreal>). One especially successful student project was an interesting re-curation of a video-recorded Holocaust survivor’s testimony, called “A Storyteller’s Story” (see [http://cerev.org/Projects/Ted\\_Bolgar/](http://cerev.org/Projects/Ted_Bolgar/)). It asked questions about the way that personal narratives like testimonies are formatted. The students focused on how such stories may conceal as much as they reveal, and thereby protect the narrator from pain, as well as how first-person witnesses become “professionalized” as their testimonies are increasingly prized (and rare). The film touches on the anxieties that the inevitable professional “polishing” creates among audiences, who look for a particular kind of immediacy from testimonies.

Perhaps ironically, even people affiliated with CEREV are still more fluent in theorizing this kind of work than realizing it in our lab space. Curatorial work is a huge commitment. It’s often very expensive and resource intensive; it involves an enormous amount of extra work and complicated relationship maintenance; and it still rarely counts for tenure and promotion. So it’s hard to retrain logocentric humanities scholars to imagine how (and why) they might exhibit their research. To this end, I’ve co-edited a forthcoming volume with my colleague Shelley Butler at McGill, titled *Curatorial Dreams: Critics Imagine Exhibitions* (Butler and Lehrer in press), in which we’ve tasked museum and cultural critics with sketching visions for exhibitions that respond to their own critiques.

**JLA:** Using CEREV as a jumping-off point, consider how the digitalization of visual media has changed the way

we think about our research. Has it? Should it? Does the Internet represent the museum's "next frontier"?

**EL:** The Internet, and particularly its social media aspects, has more than anything created the potential for a multiplicity of communities of discourse, encounter, and action around various issues. Of particular interest to me is the vastly facilitated ability to "speak back at" institutionalized interpretations of history and culture in ways that leave enduring public traces. In essence, any physical manifestation of public culture can now be supplemented by accessible or downloadable interpretive materials created by various individuals and groups, and in cyberspace there are infinite alternatives. This increases the need for "curators" who cull from among these and assess them, but in general the dispersal of power and perspective creates great potential. It doesn't replace the need for the democratization of physical museum sites, which still carry great authority with mainstream publics, but it creates a whole range of tools to supplement and intervene in these in ways that are still just beginning to be explored.

**JLA:** How would you characterize the discipline's investments in "the visual" (be that film, photography, etc.) both now and in the past? Do anthropologists do enough with visual media? What more should or could we do?

**EL:** I've always loved journalist James Agee's agonizing riff in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (2001), where he rails against having only words (and then with Walker Evans, additionally photographs) to work with to try to transmit some sense of the lives of others. He has this memorable bit where he says that if it were up to him he'd do no writing

at all, but aside from the photos, the page would be just lumps of dirt and fragments of wood and scraps and smells and sounds. This is where I think experimental ethnography would do well to reconnect with the museum. 3-D, social, physical gallery space offers the possibility to render so much more of the texture of lived experience than only writing, and maybe more significantly it has the potential, as the late museum pedagogy theorist Roger Simon (2007) put it, to "support new ways of relating with and within the world." Once you've had the experience of having crowds of people standing inside your exhibit, seeing on their faces expressions of deep engagement, seeing them being moved, and listening to them debating with other visitors the questions you've posed, it's really hard to go back to just writing.

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## Review Essay

# *Serial*, Seriality, and the Possibilities for the Podcast Format

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In the fall of 2014, investigative journalist and *This American Life* producer Sarah Koenig hosted a podcast called *Serial*.<sup>1</sup> Koenig's idea was to serialize a single story into multiple episodes. She claimed she chose this particular story—about the murder of an 18-year-old high school student Hae Min Lee, allegedly by Adnan Syed, Lee's ex-boyfriend—because it fell into her lap. A friend of Adnan Syed brought the case to Koenig, and Koenig agreed to pursue it, episode by episode.

What followed was remarkable.

In November 2014, *The New York Times* reported that *Serial* was getting around 1.5 million downloads per episode.<sup>2</sup> It spawned both amateur and professional parodies. A sub-Reddit emerged in which amateur investigators dug up details about the case. In short, *Serial* became a cultural phenomenon.

The three of us, all fans of the show, recently came together to talk about why *Serial* was so popular and how we as academics might harness the podcast medium for anthropological and ethnographic research. What can we, as academics, learn from the popularity of this podcast?

First, what is a podcast?

The word *podcast* is a portmanteau combining *iPod*, the game-changing portable media player released in 2001, and *broadcasting*. Podcasting emerged into a swell of digital revolutionary sentiment partly because its simplicity was proof of the prowess of amateur media producers.<sup>3</sup> Podcasts are themselves the combination of audio files and a syndication system, the RSS feed, that pushes new content to audience members' portable devices automatically. When RSS collided with the popularity of the iPod and a growing number of media producers with access to editing platforms, the podcast was born in 2004. In 2005, the *New Oxford American Dictionary* named *podcast* the word of the year.

When you consider the technical system of podcasting, it's not hard to see why podcasters started calling their content "shows" with "episodes" emerging on a regular basis. Podcasting's automatic syndication lends itself to seriality. As with its sibling medium radio, podcasting benefits greatly from commuters, many by car, who listen to their podcasts in their own serialized daily habits of travel. Emerging about ten years after the inception of the podcasting medium, the podcast *Serial* actually names this technical tendency in its title.

But of course *Serial* is not really named for how it is delivered to its listeners. It's named for the weekly release of the clues Koenig follows in her attempt to find out whether Adnan Syed murdered his ex-girlfriend in early 1999. Part of what makes *Serial* so popular and, as many listeners profess, so addicting is how well it fits into the true crime genre, buttressed by the promise of an investigative journalist to answer that burning question at the center of the series: Did he do it?

At the end of the first episode, a number of people weigh in, none named so as to represent an average audience. One suggests Syed was framed. Another asks, with a desperation that never leaves the show, if it wasn't him, who else could it have been? As the episode ends, *Serial's* catchy theme music plays out the credits. It's a simple chord progression, noncommittal affectively but effective in reminding listeners of the enduring sense of mystery.

In the late 1970s, Italian theorist Carlo Ginzburg began to write about what he called an "evidentiary paradigm" of clues across the human sciences and humanities. He shows that from art history's interest in forgeries to Sigmund Freud's fascination with the "divine secrets and concealed things" in the psyche to criminology's primordial investment in collecting and cataloguing evidence, the clue's the thing.<sup>4</sup>

In anthropology, too, clues are a compelling way to think about what the ethnographer seeks during fieldwork. The contested investments in empiricism question what ethnographic methods actually allow us to see or to represent. Ethnographers are often caught between close-range details they gather in the field and the macrolevel structure these clues promise to reveal.

Now, Koenig is not a detective, something she emphasizes to make clear—her project is journalistic at heart. But if we recognize that detection is at least partly baked into the way we understand inquiry of all kinds, including academic and journalistic, would it be so odd to think that Koenig and *Serial* have something to teach us?

As academics, we want our research to reach a broader audience than just our community of scholars working on the same subject. Anthropologists often wonder if the discipline, as we want to believe, has the potential to change the world, to encourage greater cultural sensitivity, to bring institutional accountability. We question whether it could facilitate transparency in social and political matters, as Rob Borofsky discusses in his book, *Why a Public Anthropology?*,<sup>5</sup> in which he asks: Why hasn't cultural anthropology lived up

to its transformative potential? How might it be encouraged to do so now?

Media have been lodged at the center of how anthropologists collect, analyze, and circulate data since at least Clifford Geertz's imploration for researchers to circumscribe their ethnographic documentations with "thick description." Visual anthropologists are particularly sensitive to the ways that the technologies we use in the field, the film camera for example, become integral ways to literally and conceptually frame the research artifacts. So, as media anthropologists, we should add the podcast to this mix, taking up how the form itself helps us engage with classic questions about authority, authorship, and representation.

Perhaps recent reflections on blogging might parallel the possibilities for podcasting. David Price recently wrote an essay in *American Anthropologist* on "Blogging Anthropology" in which he describes some of the existing options for publishing research blogs.<sup>6</sup> In this, Price points out that while this format is not competitive with peer-reviewed scholarship, it is nonetheless becoming "anthropologist's new electronic polis."

These online platforms offer a unique site for public anthropology, because in the digital space, we have no editorial barriers between writing something and quickly sending it out into the world. So the question is whether podcasting, like blogging, can be a venue for anthropology's public engagements—a place where can we look for models to help us get started?

Some have said that we're experiencing a podcast renaissance as podcasts like *Serial*, *99% Invisible*, *This American Life*, and *Planet Money*, among others, continue to reach many people through their mobile devices. How can we harness inspiration from this popularity while beginning to imagine what a research podcast might sound like?

One experiment we can point to is the *3620 Podcast*, produced by the doctoral students of the Annenberg School for Communication, including two authors of this essay, Gotkin and Laughlin, which experiments with ways to present research, including ethnographic research, in an aural medium.<sup>7</sup> In our experiments with the podcast format, we have had to address questions that just don't come up in our writing: How can we establish authority through our vocal registers, for example? How are arguments made in sound? How might we balance the aesthetics of this medium with the imperative to present sound research?

At the center of questions about the style and aesthetics of podcasting is the voice. We know, of course, that Koenig's voice is carefully stylized to realize the goals that she and public radio generally set up. The parodies of Koenig's voice to the point of meme-ification are in some sense an indication that the public radio voice has a recognizable aesthetic that helps Koenig tell her story.

On a theoretical level, what do we mean by "voice"? Linguistic anthropologists often look to Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of voice, which is concerned with how speech utterances index identifiable speaking personae—that is, meaning how a particular way of speaking draws from a



much larger social field where we can link the speech forms to class, profession, slang forms, and so on.<sup>8</sup> The typifiability of voices is premised by an understanding that listeners can perceive voicing contrasts. When we listen to *Serial*'s characters—just their voices, their accents, the use of a particular phrase, all are categorized based on what we know about U.S. speakers and their voices. Asif Agha speaks about a class of social voices that are linked to what he calls registers.<sup>9</sup> A register, something like legalese or military speech, is a “reflexive model of language use that is disseminated along identifiable trajectories in social space through communicative processes.” I know it’s a mouthful, but the concept describes many mouthfuls.

Returning to Koenig’s podcasting style, we can see an instantiation of a socially recognizable public radio voice from which she is drawing. But as Agha points out, it’s never so simple. A register is never static; rather, speakers are constantly troping and pulling from many different voices—what Bakhtin has called “heteroglossia.” Koenig is also a white, upper-middle-class, U.S. woman. Her use of the quotative *like*, vocal fry, uptalk or rising intonation, and other stylings are pulling from a kind of “valley girl” speak made popular by Hollywood films like *Clueless*. We continue to hear it everywhere. Like, really though. Koenig certainly pulls from and laminates these multiple voices, the public radio register and the valley girl register, to create the highly stylized voice we hear on *Serial*.

We know that public radio strategically deploys a particular social voice that has been carefully crafted to convey authority but also a kind of intimacy. Conversely as academics, we write with disciplinary voices that often shun intimacy in favor of a seemingly neutral, objective voice. Academic textual practice has been a process of concealing the body, of which the voice is an important part.<sup>10</sup> Thus, even though we know that registers are central to how every speaker communicates, the podcast form opens up what academics have tried to cover up. Koenig’s use of the public radio voice certainly gives her authority as the storyteller or journalist. But perhaps if anthropologists start making podcasts, it would be more difficult, or actually impossible, to conceal our subjectivities. That possibility produces a lot of anxiety for anthropologists.

Of course, the anthropological project is preoccupied with this very question of subjectivity, especially in relation to how ethnographers tell other people’s stories. Koenig is telling the story—she’s framing the lives of two people, a young Korean American woman, Hae Min Lee, and her Pakistani American boyfriend, Adnan Syed. The fact that their story concerns an interracial relationship and that Lee’s murder was framed by the courts as an honor killing makes this story a particularly sensitive one to tell.

Given both the popularity of the podcast and the dearth of media representations of Muslim Americans, *Serial* has become a form of public anthropology about these minority communities. In fact, it is now being used as a pedagogical tool in a Harvard undergraduate course. Zareena Grewal, a Harvard anthropologist, discussed on social media that she is

trying to figure out how to teach *Serial*—which she describes as “a refreshing (complex) representation of American Muslims no matter how you assign guilt & innocence.”<sup>11</sup> For Grewal, it appears that the inadequacies of Koenig’s representation are balanced by the fact that her work has created the space to even have this conversation.

But many would hesitate here. Not just any representation will do, only those that stand up to the ethical standards that scholars have long used to evaluate the rigor and responsibility of our research. For example, there’s a line from the first episode where Koenig makes a flippant comment about Adnan and Hae’s relationship that we, in our discussion, were stuck on. Koenig states:

I read a few newspaper clips about the case, looked up a few trial records. And on paper, the case was like a Shakespearean mashup—young lovers from different worlds thwarting their families, secret assignations, jealousy, suspicion, and honor besmirched, the villain not a Moor exactly, but a Muslim all the same, and a final act of murderous revenge.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that Koenig relies on an understanding of Muslimness here that spans from Shakespearean representations of the Moor to Adnan Sayed, a Pakistani American from Baltimore, shows that her investments in the politics and ethics of representation do not quite meet the rigorous standards that we, as academics, would like to think that we have for ourselves.

Ultimately, Koenig only sporadically interrogates her position as a white journalist producing representations about people of color with different relationships to, well, “this American life.” Who is she speaking to? Data on podcasting audiences show that Koenig’s listeners are wealthier and more educated than most Americans, a fact that should trouble us in the same way that the university’s own unwitting perpetuation of unequal distribution to higher education troubles us.<sup>13</sup> As anthropologists, we find her storytelling lacking in precisely what our discipline has spent most of its time teasing out about who is speaking and being heard.

When we sat down to talk about *Serial*, it was ethical loopholes like this one that struck us the most. What we started to realize is that Koenig signals her findings in the face of uncertainty in a very different way than we do in the academy. Ultimately, we wondered if these questions of ethics, of the politics of representation, of self-reflexivity—all the shortcuts Koenig took that we wouldn’t—might be part of the reason why an academic version of *Serial* might not ever be as popular.

Are academics afraid of style? Of aesthetics? We certainly do not want to be accused of creating entertainment at the cost of creating knowledge. *Serial* could be accused of being merely a piece of entertainment, a particularly problematic criticism given that it concerns a real-life murder. But what we mean by “entertainment” is actually a complicated milieu between researcher, informant, and audience. Questions of style in podcasting—from how we signal uncertainty and present clues to how we tell the stories of

others—throw established means of representation in the academy into sharp relief.

So, let us now turn to the question that appealed to millions of listeners of *Serial*: Did Adnan Syed kill Hae Min Lee? Where did Koenig's trail of clues ultimately lead?

Koenig ends *Serial* with this reflection:

When Rabia first told me about Adnan's case, certainty, one way or the other seemed so attainable. We just needed to get the right documents, spend enough time, talk to the right people, find his alibi. Then I did find Asia, and she was real and she remembered and we all thought, "how hard could this possibly be? We just have to keep going." Now, more than a year later, I feel like shaking everyone by the shoulders like an aggravated cop. Don't tell me Adnan's a nice guy, don't tell me Jay was scared, don't tell me who might have made some five-second phone call. Just tell me the facts, ma'am, because we didn't have them 15 years ago and we still don't have them now.<sup>14</sup>

Clues and their serial renderings are what compel us, journalists and academics alike, to continue in the inquiries to which we devote ourselves. For academics, the excited water cooler conversations about whether Adnan did or didn't kill his ex-girlfriend express a certain affinity for the satisfaction that finding and following clues can give us. The mystery for us here, however, is not to pin down anything definitive about the people we want to understand in our research. The mystery for us is how to make podcasting a viable medium for many kinds of anthropological pursuits.

For the moment, *Serial* is the shining example of how a podcast can capture the attention of millions of listeners and make them care about the lives of a few people in Baltimore. Though we have issues with how Koenig proceeded, we, as academics, should not ignore her experiment. The conventions of the podcast genre are in flux, which is both exciting and anxiety producing for academics who want to present research in this form. *Serial* reveals the potential for the podcast medium to be a robust site for new, multivocal experiments in ethnographic representation. As such, it may be the form of the future for the project of public anthropology. It may be our smoking gun.

## Notes

1. Koenig 2014.
2. Carr 2014.
3. Sterne et al. 2008.
4. Ginzburg 1980.
5. Borofsky 2011.
6. Price 2010.
7. *3620 Podcast*, see <http://podcast.asc.upenn.edu>.
8. See Bakhtin 1981.
9. See Agha 2007.
10. See Marvin 1994.
11. Grewal 2015.
12. See "Episode 1: The Alibi," *Serial*, October 3, 2014, <http://serialpodcast.org/>.
13. Zickuhr 2013.
14. See "Episode 12: What We Know," *Serial*, December 18, 2014, <http://serialpodcast.org/>.
15. You can listen to a podcast of this commentary by going to <https://archive.org/details/SerialSerialityAndThePossibilitiesForThePodcastFormat>. This is an edited version of the transcript.

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## Film Review

## Milind Soman Made Me Gay

Harjant Gill, dir. 27 min. USA. Frameline, 2007. English. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0dVB4M1FEc>, accessed March 13, 2014.

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In Esther Newton's (2000) collection of essays, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, Newton asks a pressing and significant question for anthropologists doing research in the field of sexuality. In her final chapter, "My Best Informant's Dress," she considers the articulation of erotic subjectivity in the field as something other than a "heroic quest" with or for the other. Specifically, she asks whether "the erotic ever make[s] a human gesture" by situating her lifelong relationship with her closest interlocutor, Kay (an important figure in her well-known ethnography about gay culture in Cherry Grove, Long Island, New York, in the late 1980s). Newton recalls that, without notice or preparation, Kay, at 80 years old and confined to an electric cart, affectionately embraces her leg. Newton writes to David Schneider about this moment, describing the intimacy of the encounter by relating its immediate intensity to Kay's status as her best informant. She recounts: "My heart turned over . . . such are the perils of fieldwork" (Newton 2000:252). What is particularly pertinent about Newton's story is that she recalls these moments not to gain a better, more objective perspective or to displace the relevance of the embrace through a long-awaited confessional. Instead, Newton acknowledges the gesture as a moment of undoing. The ethnographic imperative here is tied to listening as a necessary means not only for connectivity and writing but also for feeling (vulnerable) in affective and unpredictable worlds.

In the 2007 short film *Milind Soman Made Me Gay*, anthropologist Harjant Gill reconstructs his own undoing in relation with and alongside other South Asian gay men, who are compelled to make sense of their emergent and embodied exclusions. They forge pathways of gendered performance in line with Gill's own movement between India and the United States. Gill's film title, like Esther Newton's, is a queer exploration—a visual narrative that brings together desire, mourning, and longing, as when he poignantly describes childhood memories of fleeing India after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. Gill was only two years old at the height of the persecution and targeting of Sikhs in India, and he attempts to piece together his family's emotional silence around this historical event, as well as his Sikh identity and desire to return to India. What is carved in Gill's memory is the Hindu man on the street who offered him and his family refuge amid the chaos and violence, ultimately saving their lives.

This memory is not isolated as a trauma nor is it disconnected from what comes later in life when he sets his eyes on the Indian model and Bollywood actor Milind Soman. What matters here is the selection and sequence of events as they oscillate between displacement and homoerotic discovery. Gill's desire for Milind Soman is typical of an adolescent's crush for an unattainable celebrity, but there is also a queer connection to his attraction. Despite Soman's performance of heterosexuality, he is charged in 1995 for obscenity and "corrupting public morality" after appearing nude in an advertisement. Gill underscores this by appearing nude in his film, accompanied by image projections of Soman and a woman entangled in the nude, yet, according to Gill, they appear distant from each other as Soman looks away from her and into the camera (see Figure 1). In Gill's imagination, it is instead Soman's and Gill's own eyes that meet. A beautiful collage is formed that frames Gill's desire as moving between signifiers of "obscene" corporeal (hetero)sexuality and the projected texts of India's penal code regarding "obscenity." It doesn't matter that Soman is holding a woman, and it is in this instance that Gill is struck by Soman's beauty and intense eyes. This visual enrapture is also what moves Gill to abandon the camera, and it isn't the first scene in which this happens. Earlier, when the film is introduced, Gill is moving between projections of abundant root vegetables and fruit, as he narrates his envisioned travel back to India and admits that he may not be able to recognize the place he has imagined as home. These emotions are stunningly projected as raw produce blurring into his body as signs of home, longing, and apprehension.

Like the other men interviewed in Gill's film, locations of desire are not immediately obvious. For Daniel Singh, it is in witnessing the gracefulness of an Indian actor; for Ayush Gupta, it was in falling in love with a white man, despite his idealization of South Asian men; for Salman Shamsi, it was in turning back on his religion and becoming undone from kissing a man for the first time.

Gill, like the other gay men, does not explicitly take solace in U.S. discourses of liberal sexuality. The charmed circle of heteronormativity is pervasive, and queers are reminded of their abjection, no matter where they are. At 17 years old, Gill questions whether his fate is "inescapable" as a gay South Asian man living in the United States, where the brutal homophobic murder of 21-year-old Matthew Sheppard highlights his own sexuality, which prompts caution from others. Sexual and raced identity politics is undoubtedly central to Gill's film; however, the goal is

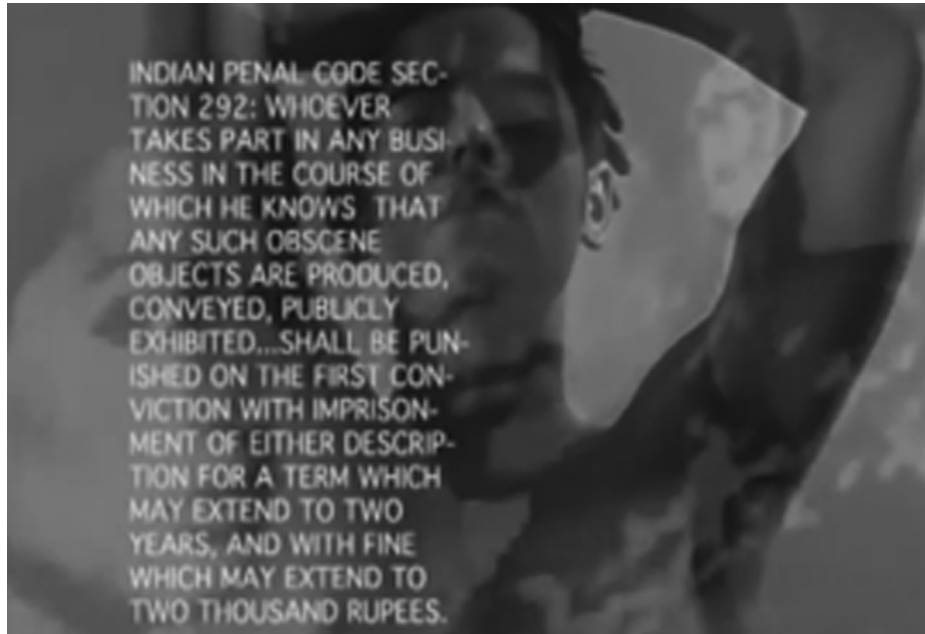


FIGURE 1. Harjant Gill foregrounded with Milind Soman and a woman in the background. (Courtesy of Harjant Gill)

not one of unity, wherein subjects stay intact for the purpose of garnishing “rights” afforded to those who belong to a distinct group. Judith Butler (2004:20) elaborates on this point in her essay titled “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy,” in which she suggests that the formation of other kinds of communities—ones shaped by those who are “beside themselves”—is possible. Gill returns to India after ten years, and his failed search for Milind Soman is also the necessary rupture from an imagined India and an imagined sense of self, one that can no longer easily respond to questions of where he’s from: “One does not always stay intact . . . it may be that one wants to, or does, but it may also be that despite one’s best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by

the prospect of touch, by the memory of the feel” (Butler 2004:19).

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