Screenplay, Novel, and Poem: The Value of Borrowing From Three Literary Genres to Frame Our Thinking as We Gather, Analyze, and Elevate Data in Applied Ethnographic Work

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Applied ethnography still struggles with the fundamental challenges of (1) framing research to obtain 'thick' data, (2) making sense of data in teams and with clients, and (3) making a convincing case with data in challenging environments. We have observed that borrowing from literary genres can be effective in addressing these challenges. We therefore argue that in an age of data science, it is just as important to draw from the literary arts when gathering, analyzing, and elevating evidence to inspire change in applied ethnographic work. We raise three specific applications of literary genres to distinct project phases, to improve how data is collected and analyzed, and how data travels. In this paper we show: (1) how the screenplay can help solve challenges in research framing, to obtain thicker data; (2) how the novel can help solve challenges in analysis, to turn data into meaningful evidence; (3) how poetry can help solve challenges in the opportunities-development phase of a project, to turn evidence into action.

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INTRODUCTION

Unlike other forms of data collection and analysis – from physics to market research – ethnography has the unique ability to render a deep understanding of everyday human experience in situ and it's many underling meanings. As the field of applied ethnography explores new intersections with data science, we as practitioners should not forget these 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973) that set our work apart and give it distinct value. Indeed, it may be the combination of big data with our thick descriptions that increases the relevance and impact of both data science and ethnography (see for example the concept and practicalities of big and thick data working together, explored by Trisha Wang 2013 and Arora et.al. 2018). Yet we still grapple with three fundamental challenges in doing the work that defines applied ethnography: framing our research to obtain thick data when we are in the field, making sense of that data in teams and with clients, and making a convincing case with data in challenging environments, to mobilize change. (Some of these perennial challenges and the reasons behind them – such as demands to do our work faster and cheaper, and client perceptions that we only offer consumer research and not strategy, are explored in Lombardi 2009 and Hou & Holmes 2015.)

In our daily work on projects across various sectors, we have observed that drawing on literary genres to guide our thinking has greatly helped us grapple with these fundamental challenges. We therefore argue that in an age of data science, it is just as important – if not

more important – to hone our skills in the humanities, drawing from the literary arts when gathering, analyzing, and elevating evidence to inspire change in applied ethnographic work. Only by continuing to explore innovative ways to do the 'basics' of applied ethnography can we take our field in new directions (like intersections with data science) while upholding our core approach and value.

Using examples from our own ethnographic work, in conversation with critical thinking in applied and academic anthropology, this paper will explore why and how three literary genres – screenplay, novel, and poem – can be impactful across three distinct phases of applied ethnographic work. Incorporating these genres promises to make our research framing more humanistic, our analysis deeper, and the impact of our insights more strongly felt. We will discuss how the screenplay can help solve challenges in research framing to obtain thicker data, how the novel can help solve challenges in analysis to turn data into meaningful evidence, and how poetry can help solve challenges in opportunities-development to turn evidence into action. Experimentation with literary genres should not mean the abuse of raw ethnographic data, therefore risks and careful considerations will be discussed in each literary genre's section in the paper.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND FICTION: A COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP

We will begin here with a discussion of existing academic and applied thinking on the connections between ethnography and creative writing. More broadly, the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC) has continually explored how other disciplines and practices can strengthen our own. Some examples include: borrowing from negative space drawing in the visual arts to help clients broaden their perspectives and sense opportunities beyond their initial objectives (Chang & Lipson 2008); bringing the ethos of repetition found in yoga to generate new insights from past ethnographic research (Thomas 2010); connecting the empathy, nuance, symbolism, and lyricism found in Indian classical dance to the basic aims of good ethnographic practice (Vadrevu 2017); thinking like curators to mediate ideas, perspectives, and discourses for our clients (Powell 2016). As these examples show, we are an interdisciplinary community driven by both a desire to uphold the standards of ethnographic practice set forth in academic anthropology, and a curiosity to experiment with how ethnography flexes and morphs in applied contexts filled with opportunities and constraints not typically found in academia. Thinking through how literary genres can inform our work builds on both this drive to do good ethnography and this curiosity to improve and expand what we do in our unique circumstances.

Rick E. Robinson started the discussion within EPIC on literature's applicability to our work in his paper (2009) on the need to elevate writing and style in applied ethnography. Robinson draws primarily on James Woods' *How Fiction Works* (2008), a short book meant to help literary enthusiasts, writers, and a general audience understand what makes a work of fiction so resonant. Robinson introduces applied ethnographers to Woods' concept of "lifeness" – "life brought to a different life by the highest artistry" that renders "truthfulness to the way things are" (Wood 2008:247). Robinson draws a connection between the lifeness found in literature and ethnography's own preoccupation with truthfulness across all phases, from observation to interpretation (Robinson 2009:94). He suggests that we can do more of the artistry needed to bring out this truthfulness in our projects, "doing the hard work of communicating not just with clarity and fidelity, but with some of the flair, imagination, and

voice of the best in fiction" (Robinson 2009:95). Robinson argues for this perhaps counterintuitive approach especially because our audience is different from that of academic ethnographers:

> Style, I think, requires that we do not bracket the passions we find in our work; that when we are stirred, when we observe the stirring, we make space for it in how we write. Writing for an academic audience removes, implicitly, the opportunity to create characters and implies that the authorial viewpoint is an objective one, a scientific one, rooted in description, and shying away from the explicit expression of values, or the imagination of futures. The first move in developing styles for our space then, is to considerably broaden the notion of who our readers might be. (Robinson 2009:42)

Drawing inspiration from Robinson's call to action, this paper delineates how, concretely and specifically, we might introduce more of the literary arts at particular phases of our work. We address the tension that Robinson points to – that it takes artistry (perhaps more so than hard science) to convey the deep truthfulness ethnography aspires to convey.

Indeed, the three literary genres we discuss in this paper – screenplay, novel, and poem – all bring something quite dangerous to applied ethnographic praxis: fiction. The danger of fiction, of course, stems from ethnography's promise to reveal lived realities. As Dawn Nafus and ken anderson (2006) point out, we have built a "real people brand" for ourselves, pitching how "'we' can help businesses figure out what 'real people' want, or otherwise what they do with products. Such 'real people', are always at some distance, a shifting horizon to which the ethnographer goes and returns" (245). And this brand recognition has grown so strong that, as the authors argue, it shortchanges the real work of analysis (Nafus & anderson 2006:249). So what business does fiction have in the 'real people' work that we do? Would it not undermine the truth we promise to deliver?

Originally published in 1986, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnographic* (Clifford & Marcus, eds. 2010) launched an ongoing conversation within academic anthropology around the implications of writing ethnographies – what does it mean that there is an author, not just a fieldworker or researcher or scientist, but an author, who ultimately translates experience into text? With the realization that "writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do both in the field and thereafter" (Clifford 2010a:2), the anthropological eye turned inward to an analysis of the anthropologist's own context, power, and biases. Anthropologists also began to consider their relationship with literature, noting how '[l]iterary processes – metaphor, figuration, narrative – affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered, from the first jotted 'observation,' to the completed book […]" (Clifford 2010a:4). Rather than approach this realization as a problem within the discipline, these scholars were curious to explore both the implications and possibilities of the literary spirit in anthropology. In fact, academic anthropologists today are exploring with literary formats like poetry and graphic novels to reach broader audiences, convey the very intense experiences of participants they've met in the field in more resonant ways, and collaborate across projects to draw broader conclusions (Jackson 2010, Hamdy & Nye 2018).

Even in applied contexts, still what we do is write – memos, reports, presentations, recommendations – from our experiences in the field. Though "we opened ourselves up to ethnography being seen as natural observation" we are not in fact "butterfly collecting or trainspotting" (Nafus & anderson 2006:249, 252). We may have given our clients this impression, but since *Writing Culture* anthropologists have grappled with the dilemma that we

are not simply making objective observations. We write, in many ways like playwrights, novelists, and poets write. Like the scholars of *Writing Culture,* we seek in this paper to acknowledge this reality in our applied work – that there are elements of the literary in the ways we analyze and articulate – and to carefully explore its possibilities.

But first, let us establish some fundamental differences between fiction and ethnography. Anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen, outlining the relevance of fiction in anthropology, writes:

> Fictional accounts […] present persons and events which have been invented by the writer. Anthropological texts try to present *a few aspects of* social reality as accurately as possible, taking account of the limitations entailed by fieldwork, 'cultural translation' (or, if one prefers, cultural reduction) and attempts at linguistic representations of society. Lies and deliberate misrepresentations are banished from anthropological scholarship, which should additionally – unlike fictional writing – try to present empirical material systematically and comprehensively and distinguish between description and analysis so that the reader may draw his or her own theoretical conclusions. (1994:168-9)

Fiction, though evocative and vivid, can lack accuracy, comprehensiveness, and comparability – virtues we value in ethnography (Eriksen 1994:193). We write and read ethnographies primarily to understand something about a subset of the world, and this is not typically the case with fiction. Wood points out that although we gain this understanding from reading fiction, this is not what we set out to do when reading it, "[w]e read fiction because it pleases us, moves us, is beautiful, and so on – because it is alive and we are alive" (Wood 2008:170). Ethnography and fiction have different starting points and expectations.

However, there are some fundamental similarities between ethnography and fiction. Clifford goes so far as to say that although "[t]o call ethnographies fictions may raise empiricist hackles…[e]thnographic writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of 'something made or fashioned'" (Clifford 2010a:6). In good ethnography, as in good fiction, there is the careful and deliberate attempt to render a world. Ethnography and fiction both create reductions of social reality (Eriksen 1994:192-3) – we must acknowledge that as ethnographers we do not provide a full account of the worlds we venture into, but an account of what we deem relevant to the questions at hand. Both fiction and ethnography search for higher truths. In ethnography the truth of particular interest is what goes beyond the individual, to what applied anthropologist Suzanne L. Thomas describes as "a truthful social performance, one that enacts social and cultural dynamics not isolatable facts of individual behaviors…we deal in identities, narratives, symbols and artifacts, and seek truthfulness on this scale" (Thomas 2010:241).

Moreover, ethnography and fiction both have a deep concern for empathy. For ethnographers, empathy is what helps build rapport in the field, empathy is what makes the 'other' of traditional anthropological study ultimately comprehensible, understandable, relatable. Good ethnography creates empathy in readers, clients, or stakeholders. Wood points out that in good fiction empathy is a byproduct too, what he calls "fiction's true mimesis: to see a world and its fictional people truthfully may expand our capacity for sympathy in the actual world" (Wood 2008:171-2).

There are some unique circumstances of applied ethnography, in particular, that render the literary even more useful to our field. We are ultimately trying to convince and persuade – we want our clients or the organizations for whom we do applied ethnographic work to be convinced that we have to say is true and insightful, and we want to persuade those clients or

organizations to change, sometimes in fundamental ways, according to the implications of our truths and insights. In *Writing Culture*, Vincent Crapanzano draws a comparison between Hermes, the Greek patron god of literature, and the ethnographer, and the comparison may be especially apt for the applied ethnographer in particular:

> Hermes was a trickster: a god of cunning and tricks. The ethnographer is no trickster. He, so he says, has no cunning and no tricks. But he shares a problem with Hermes. He must make his message convincing. It treats of the foreign, the strange, the unfamiliar, the exotic, the unknown – that, in short, which challenges belief. The ethnographer must make use of all the persuasive devices at his disposal to convince his readers of the truth of his message, but, as though these rhetorical strategies were cunning tricks, he gives them scant recognition. (Crapanzano 2010:52)

We could borrow a technique or two from the literary to write persuasively and convincingly, and to think insightfully, for our clients and organizations. These are audiences (often actually collaborators) who need more than the knowledge of descriptions – they need eureka moments, persuasion to believe something matters enough to act on it, and plans for the future. As Robinson argues, "[f]iction is the narrative imagining of invented worlds. We are not in the business of inventing data, but we are in the business of imagining futures every bit as much as we are in the business of representing realities" (2009:101). New products, new services, new spaces, new structures – these require imagination, the stuff of literature. Our need to convince, persuade, and imagine futures makes a familiarity with the literary especially relevant.

But despite the profound impact of *Writing Culture,* scholar of literature and anthropology Oscar Hemer still observes that "[w]hereas writing style is crucial for a literary writer or a journalist, in academia it is not only strikingly subordinated; it is even met with suspicion, as if eloquence were a way of concealing a meagre academic content" (2016:161). His observation that "writing is not usually associated with methodology" (Hemer 2016:161) is not simply pointing towards a problem in technique, but a bigger problem in thinking. Writing as methodology is not just how we express what we have found in the field – it is also how we think throughout our projects. In her foreword to the 25th anniversary edition of *Writing Culture*, anthropologist Kim Fortun reflects that ethnographers should experiment with ways of writing, dappling in different genres like the novel, because "[e]xperimentation, here (as in the sciences) is as much about constraint as freedom. Writing then, is not only about representation or even evocation but a way to generate insight" (2010:xi). We will now proceed to outline how we can draw inspiration from writing in literary genres, not just to create reports, memos, or presentations, but actually to actually frame our thinking and approach across three distinct phases of a project.

THE SCREENPLAY IN A PROJECT'S FRAMING PHASE

When we frame a project in applied ethnography, we typically develop a field guide or protocol to structure our time in the field. This encompasses questions we want to ask of our research participants, places we want to explore, activities we want to observe. Under intense time, resource, and client pressures, we've observed that this guide risks becoming a survey or questionnaire for research participants, flattening the data we collect.

For example, in a recent study on a chronic health condition, a team at ReD Associates set out to meet research participants at various stages of the condition, from pre-diagnosis to decades of chronic health management. The team assembled in a room to prep for going to the field. Capturing, in one concise field guide, the breadth of experiences they wanted to study was proving to be a challenge. Flipping to the section of the field guide that focused on building initial rapport with the participant, the team read through the suggested first questions: 'How do you imagine your future panning out?' 'Are there any big changes on the horizon?'

A burst of laughter rang out: "I honestly can't imagine asking that to a complete stranger who's just walked into my home." The team shifted uncomfortably in their seats, and proceeded to review the rest of the themes, topics, and activities, as originally drafted in the field guide. A new consultant asked: "So, I realize I'm new to this, at least in terms of there being a client involved…but I can't quite shake the feeling that this is incredibly stiff. It feels like an interrogation."

The team continued to go through the field guide, section by section. The project manager began to realize the reason for all the hesitation, the discomfort of what on paper appeared too personal for researchers to see themselves asking when they got to the field. Based on the way the field guide was drafted, they had all been imagining two individuals sitting across from each other on a couch or at a table for eight hours. No one had moved, and only one person had asked questions. It was a one-scene act, set in a living room, one actor playing the interrogator. Seeing it in this way made her realize the research framing was all wrong, and they were not going to get the thick descriptions they needed. "Okay, I get it, this totally reads like a police procedural. Let's think about this differently. What kind of screenplay are we writing?"

The team set out on their revision and started to consider 'setting' –to see where participants took their treatment, where they went day-to-day and how their condition might interfere with those outings. They thought of the 'props'– to know what treatments patients took and what remedies or solutions they carried with them on-the-go. They tried to envision 'dialogue' – to glean the perspectives not just of the participants but also of their families, and to ensure the participants would learn about the researchers in the process too. And they factored in timing – how to ensure, to the best of their abilities, they might encounter everything they wanted to explore in the field. In retrospect, what the team had really done in their revision was to borrow from the concept of a screenplay to develop a field guide that fostered deep ethnographic experiences. The team had moved away from an interview questionnaire and towards setting the scene for a dynamic interaction.

Having a playwright's ability to a set a scene and a director's eye for what to capture – the exercise our team conducted – is akin to what Thomas describes as "documentary finesse," a key skill she hires for in her applied ethnographers:

> It is not a fluke when we, as ethnographers, succinctly capture a moment in image, photo, video clip or tale. The freshness and vitality of Faulkner and Zafiroglu's video clip, I argue, is evidence of their documentary finesse. It is also evidence of a well-prepared and well-conducted field engagement. Both knew what they were looking for, how best to document it and how to finesse the appropriate social environment in which the woman would remember the third mobile phone, pull it out of her tight back pocket and talk to a team of strangers in an impossibly small Shanghai apartment while Faulkner's camera rolled. All of these, from the preparation to the finessing of the social environment to the tedious documentation comprise the art. (Thomas 2010:239)

Though at face value one could read Thomas's description of documentary finesse as an overly contrived and controlled fieldwork experience, we argue that it is more about intuition and openness – being able to imagine, ahead of time, how fieldwork might happen in the field, and planning out an experience that is not just open to, but actively encourages, the twists and turns that fieldwork can take. There is ultimately an artistry in what Thomas is describing, rooted in having a literary sensibility for how interactions – with people, material culture, and physical surroundings – could play out in the field in engaging ways.

While thinking with screenplays in ethnographic contexts might seem radical, both applied and academic scholars have explored this before. In his guide to new writing practices for novice applied ethnographers, H.L. Goodall Jr. describes what is essentially a cinematic, screenplay-like approach to verbal exchanges in the field, asking the ethnographer to consider factors such as the frame or context, the action taking place, not just what is being said but how it is spoken, and where the researcher is in the "scene" (Goodall 2000:106-7). Clifford, too, alludes to the literary and cinematic in his observation that when we go into the field we do not simply float passively in our environments, but rather "[t]he fieldworker presides over, and controls in some degree, the making of a text out of life" (Clifford 2010b:116). We should use this inherent element of ethnography to help foster deeper engagements in the field.

How, then, to have a screenplay-like approach to framing the research design before fieldwork? We here propose five screenplay elements to consider in field guide development:

1. **Setting**: Where do we want the interactions with participants to take place? Consider moving across the settings the participant typically inhabits, being careful not to assume what these places might be ahead of time. For example, the participant may have a bladder condition, but perhaps they keep their medication in the kitchen, not the bathroom. Consider, also, how to progress from setting to setting. Perhaps asking to go for a neighborhood walk does not make sense to do right away, and first the researcher and participant should get to know one another in the living room.

2. **Props**: What material culture do we want participants to share with us? Consider the objects that trigger memories and stories, like photo albums or home videos stored on phones. Consider objects that challenge or add further granularity to a participant's account. For instance, looking over medical records (shown by consent) could delineate a different treatment timeline than the participant recalled, and discussing those discrepancies together could be insightful.

3. **Dialogue**: How do we foster dynamic conversations? Consider the different "actors" of interest beyond the single participant, and how those individuals might be brought in to the interactions. Consider, also, what types of information, stories, and reflections the researchers themselves might be able to bring to the conversation, so that the participant doesn't feel the experience is one-sided (because indeed it should not be). A researcher divulging his own struggles in communicating with loved ones might help a participant share that his car is where he feels most comfortable broaching difficult topics with his kids.

4. **Action**: If we are participant-observers, what do we actually want to observe and participate in, beyond just having a conversation? Consider the activities that would intersect with the phenomenon of study in both obvious and obscure ways, and how to arrange those potential interactions ahead of time, assuming the participant is open to the ideas. This requires collaboration with the participant, and discussing with them ahead of time what day-to-day life is like. Perhaps the researcher should meet with the participant on a Tuesday rather than a Wednesday, to accompany her as she goes to the pharmacy to pick up her medication.

5. **Timing**: How do we flow through the settings and the discussion topics, to ensure there is time for everything we want to cover? Consider what is a need-to-have, and what might be sacrificed if the activities in the field go in an unexpectedly fruitful direction. How long, roughly, should each "scene" take?

Thinking of the field guide as a 'screenplay' can be problematic. We do not want to force situations. We ultimately want to develop the overall structure for the types of scenarios we want to encounter and conversations we want to have, but the key is to be open-ended rather than prescriptive or presumptuous, following how the participant interprets the 'screenplay.' We also must not force participants into situations they do not feel comfortable with – instead co-developing the activities and the spaces the ethnography will occupy, on the participant's terms. The exercise of thinking-like-a-playwright is not, fundamentally, about crafting a beautifully-written field guide, but about ensuring we get as much a sense of the "lifeness" (Wood 2008) of the phenomenon of study as we can, by planning ahead. Fortun describes it as orienting without over-determining: "Texts need to be imagined as we move through the field, directing our attention to the kinds of material we will need to *perform* an analysis. This means that we must also imagine narration and argument as we go, even while remaining open to the field's beckoning…" (Fortun 2010:xii). Outlining ways we can be carefully inspired by the screenplay genre may help us avoid common research-framing challenges in applied contexts, to obtain thicker data with which to do our analyses when we return from the field.

THE NOVEL IN A PROJECT'S ANALYSIS PHASE

After fieldwork, we often collaborate in teams and with stakeholders to develop insights. We come back with pages upon pages of field notes, thousands of photos, and connections that have not been fully formed yet. We typically need to communicate our experiences with other researchers who went to different field sites or with clients who have not been in the field themselves. With overwhelming content, and the pressure to figure it all out efficiently – what does it mean? what are the implications? – we have seen teams struggle conveying the richness of their data, and making sense of it.

For example, a few years ago we had a study on home renovations. Researchers met with participants across field sites in Europe, spending a day with each participant in their kitchen and home, walking through past, current, and future renovation plans, and observing how the participants use their kitchens and other rooms in the home. Upon returning from the field and after an hour of hearing teammates discuss a research participant – Jeppe – we

remembered nothing. Who was Jeppe, really? Why did he want to renovate his kitchen, and what was it all for? There were 29 more participants to learn about, and we were grappling with how we would make sense of it all.

Then it was time to discuss another participant – Sybil. Sybil had a story: she was the woman who, after 59 years of what she described as thinking of everyone but herself, was finally indulging in her dream kitchen. The twist: she never cooks. The big reveal: a double-door cabinet with multiple wicker compartments, space for all her unused spices, and drawers that silently closed so she could get her early morning tea without waking anyone up, and have a moment to herself. The team could remember her like a character in a novel. Through Sybil we saw the beginning of a larger pattern and story emerging in our data set. As our thinking developed around this particular type of 'forever' renovation (in contrast to the 'just-for-now' light-touch renovations we also saw in in the field), Sybil was more than just a data point in a sample of thirty – her experiences became evidence, a telling detail in a narrative. When we shared our findings with our clients, Sybil helped to carry one of the key threads of the broader story, illustrating particular motives and drives in high-cost home renovations.

Looking back, we struggled to draw insights from the field until we started thinking like novelists in how we synthesize and communicate our data: with only a brief time to share our findings with teammates and clients, we thought of ways to best describe the people we met as compelling 'characters'; we thought about 'narrative arc' and the climax and denouement of our fieldwork experiences; we considered tone – to whom were we telling our story, and what voice would be most resonant to both the data and the audience? We moved from scattered descriptions to the beginnings of a meaningful 'plot.'

A good novel gets us to understand the people we encounter in its pages. As Robinson argues, "[i]sn't this what we purport to offer to our clients, to our audiences? A level of understanding the subject that is so close as to 'inhabit' their way of being in the world? […] Allowing them to consider it, know it, and ultimately, to value it, respect it, even as we offer to change it?" (Robinson 2009:96) As much as we claim ethnography to be an account of the 'real,' there is a craft of including (determining the essential) and excluding (determining the non-essential) information to get to a deeper meaning, just as a good novel provides details that are relevant, and leaves out the extraneous. Academic anthropologists have observed this aspect of ethnography well: "[t]he best ethnographies, Clifford reminds us, are systems and economies of truth, and are structured accordingly. They convey, convince, and enroll because they select and exclude – drawing out, literally, through content and form, particular relationships" (Fortun 2010:xiii).

Thomas (2010) outlines another skill she looks for in applied ethnographers she works with, in addition to documentary finesse:

> Over the last five years, I stopped hiring ethnographers for a report. I now hire for the ability to build grounds-up a symbolic and narrative fluency amongst my team and my key stakeholders. The raw field notes, the half-baked field reports and the weekly meetings where we debate the significance of an elderly woman's loss of eyesight and her memory of reading a favorite novel – these disciplinary practices extend the longevity of the ethnographic project. The tale of the elderly woman's failing eyesight did not make it into the final report, but our debate shaped how I told and now re-tell the story of the ethnographic project. (Thomas 2010:238)

The skill Thomas is here describing around symbolic and narrative fluency is essentially the skill of a novelist in crafting a story. Sybil in our home renovation study was much like the elderly woman in Thomas's account. As with thinking like a playwright in research framing, thinking like a novelist in analysis is not about creating a vividly written story for a client or organization. It is about using literary approaches to help build ideas and think through the analysis itself, going deeper than a list of observations.

How, then, can the novel genre inspire applied ethnographers to draw out the most from their ethnographic data, upon returning from the field? We here propose three novel elements to consider in post-fieldwork analysis:

1. **Characters**: Who did we meet in the field, and how do we convey them to our teammates and stakeholders in ways relevant to the study? Consider 'sketching' each research participant in terms of their motivations, aspirations, challenges, and habits, and how these intersect with the key topics of the study. Consider what each participant helps illuminate about the project's core research questions as well as the client's assumptions, and how their experiences compare – if the participants were all in a room, how might they relate to one another? Consider how unique details feed into a broader narrative, much like how Eriksen (1994) notes that the good ethnographer, like the good novelist "tries to fuse the universal with the particular and thus accounts for individual idiosyncrasies, as well as structural and cultural defining characteristics of the different situations" (172-3). Sybil's silently closing cabinets are an idiosyncrasy, but together with other data points from other participants, help point towards a bigger insight around kitchens as a space for me-time.

2. **Plot and narrative arc:** A good work of applied ethnography is able to elucidate gripping points of tension. At one level, we describe the tensions in the lives of the participants we meet in the field – how what they say doesn't match what they do, how their aspirations don't line up with reality, how life is full of contradictions. At another level, we consider the tensions between the lives of the research participants and the (mis)understandings that clients or organizations have of them. In a study on beer and bars, we several times came across what one bar owner dubbed the "box of crap" – filled with promotional items that manufacturers, like our client, had given him, thinking these items were preciously used and constant reminders wonderful brands. Such misalignments are like dramatic irony, and also have significant business implications. How do we ensure 'aha' moments for clients and stakeholders through plots which help them come to terms with the dramatic gap between their investments and their customers' lives? These moments do not arise on their own, but rather require Robinson's definition of style, "the control and expression of ironic tension" (2009:96). It is in the analysis phase of a project that this focus on dramatic irony, plot, and a narrative arc come most into play. Moreover, the arc – if well-conceived – should naturally lead applied ethnographers to compelling solutions and opportunities.

3. **Tone**: How do we communicate our story, once we know what that story is? This is inextricably tied to the questions, "who did we meet?" and "who is our audience?" What tone best captures, and respects, the lives of the participants we met in the field? What tone will have the most resonant impact with the client or organization? Aligning or going against the expected tone should be a deliberate decision. In a study on first-time parenting and baby products, we found that a tone that alternated between preciousness and frenzy best encapsulated the whirlwind of parenting experiences we observed in the field, and the way the parents we met with spoke about their experiences themselves – at times with gentleness and awe, at times with humor and exasperation. This tone surprised our clients, who had focused solely on the preciousness of parenting, and who were only just beginning to explore humor in their positioning and messaging.

To say we should create characters out of participants, dramatic twists out of field interactions, risks being reductive. However, we argue that in applied ethnography we already run the risk of flattening the depth of the people we meet in the field. Robinson describes the typical creation of "personas" that are "shallow, simplified, and static when compared with the imperfect messiness of just plain folks […][,] characterized by a lack of multiple registers and a decided absence of tension" (Robinson 2009:102). Nafus & anderson (2006:247-9) and Chang & Lipson (2008:197) describe the problematic predominance of decontextualized photos and pull-quotes in our work, that both hide the behind-the-scenes analysis separating ethnography from naturalistic observation (Nafus & anderson 2006:252) and leave too much for the audience to fill-in with their own assumptions. Doing the work of thinking like a novelist ensures that we go beyond standalone quotes and bring the nuance of the people we met to life for our clients in lucid and relevant ways. The novel genre can inspire teams struggling to process and share complex qualitative data in a short amount of time, so that data becomes evidence – it has meaning in a plot.

Our suggestions for how to take a novelistic approach to analysis come with a bright neon warning label, though, to proceed with the utmost care and caution. We cannot fabricate or alter details from the field to fit a narrative we want to tell our clients or organization. Moreover, and more subtly, we cannot take the creative liberty of speculating on our participants' inner lives: "'*Direct introspection*' is deemed unacceptable in social anthropology. If one ventures to consider the inner states of persons, one must always refer to acts or statements as evidence" (Eriksen 1994:192). As ethnographers making sense and meaning out of people's everyday real life experiences, we must uphold ourselves to the highest truth-telling standards and use creative approaches to guide our thinking only insofar as the approaches help to convey those realities – not fabricate new ones.

THE POEM IN A PROJECT'S RECOMMENDATIONS PHASE

The latter part of an applied ethnographic project usually entails translating data into opportunities and directions. The specifics vary greatly depending on the context the applied ethnographer is working in – embedded as a branch of an organization or contracted by a client, working in private sector or public sector, working for R&D or strategy or marketing,

and so forth. Despite the differences, we share the struggle of getting our evidence to 'stick' within an organization and lead to action. This could be for a mix of reasons, not least because of an organization's inability to fully grasp and internally communicate the implications of the study.

For example, we were at a 'directions workshop' where our team was conveying to our clients the big idea for the first time. This was for a healthcare study about respiratory health. Researchers met with participants across field sites in the US, spending a day with each participant in their homes, with their friends and family, and engaging in activities outside the home to understand how chronic respiratory issues affect people in different social and environmental contexts.

We had spent the evening before the workshop finessing our points, making our case for the big misalignments between the pharmaceutical industry's prioritizations and the needs of patients. We were hopeful that our ideas would resonate with our clients, but previous conversations with them led us to believe the insights were not quite sticking, or were not helping them to see new solutions.

The next morning, at the directions workshop, our clients' reception to our slides started off contemplative and silent. We had a slide on the screen, and a few different ways of articulating our central point – a photograph, a quote from a research participant, a bulleted list of needs. In passing, someone from our team added, "…It's really a shift from keeping patients out of hospitals, to getting people out of their homes." And our client, who had been leaning back in her chair squinting at the screen, suddenly looked as if she understood. Ninety minutes and forty slides later, she summed up her key takeaways: "I really liked what you said, it's about that shift from keeping patients out of hospitals, to getting people out of their homes." Something in the simplicity and resonance of that statement, which serendipitously had the cadence of a line of poetry, made an idea stick.

When we developed the second iteration of the presentation, we wrote this line down, and used it to develop a model illustrating how the worlds of the people we met had become smaller and smaller, due to their condition. Thinking poetically helped us in two ways: poetic rhythm helped us create a value proposition that encapsulated our recommendations in a memorable, succinct way, and metaphors guided our development of a visual model to not only explain, but further think through, a key insight.

One might argue that in being too vivid and evocative in our communication we lose the seriousness of being anthropologists. Indeed, Eriksen warns that "anthropologists should probably resist the temptation to indulge in the rich and evocative language of creative writing" to avoid turning our work into "travel writing" (1994:194). But, as Robinson points out, our work as applied ethnographers is a bit different: "Were we only reporting results, there would be good reason for such a limitation. But we aren't only reporting. We are creating alternative interpretations, opening up ways of thinking differently, imagining new futures" (2009:34). He notes that we already use metaphors constantly in the 'journeys' and 'cycles' that we create as deliverables, and perhaps applying these metaphors more broadly to encapsulate insights can help communicate the truths we witness in the field, and the potential futures (2009:104). If some of the deliverables we are asked to develop are, themselves, poetically framed (albeit tepidly – there is hardly anything poetic about a consumer journey anymore) should we not harness that poetic sticking power in fresh ways?

Thomas (2010) puts it succinctly when she writes, "Corporations require one thing from ethnography: the ability to effect change. If we do not change corporate practice (from product definition to sales and marketing practices), we fail" (2010:249). Change, we would argue, comes from newfound understandings, and the metaphorical language of poetry helps us to both make sense of the unfamiliar and to see new potential in what we think we already know – something explored in *Writing Culture* as the ethnographer's task of "render[ing] the foreign familiar and preserv[ing] it's very foreignness at one and the same time" (Crapanzano 2010:52). What Crapanzano describes is a process of disorientation and reorientation, and poetic devices like the metaphor help to achieve just that through juxtapositions. One of the beauties of poetry is that helps us to appreciate what we might overlook, and the other is that it helps us to articulate experiences we struggle to understand – much like ethnography, though often in far fewer words.

How, then, can the poetry genre inspire applied ethnographers to develop impactful ideas, concepts, visualizations, and recommendations that 'stick'? We here propose two poetic elements to consider in the recommendations phase of a project:

1. **Poetic (and economical) language**: How do we crystallize exactly what we want our stakeholders to take away from our findings, in a way that carries across the organization and continues to make sense even when we are not there to explain the finer points of the fieldwork? What evokes the broader story, that the details from the field will then properly unfold in full? As Clifford observes, "'Poetry' is not limited to romantic or modernist subjectivism: it can be historical, precise, objective" (2010a:25-6), and it is precision, not romanticism, that we are after here. Poetry can be florid, but can also be incredibly economical. Thinking in metaphors and similes can do the work of "speeding us, imaginatively, toward new meaning" (Wood 2008:204). Consider thinking in hyperboles, alliterations, personifications, and repetition of imagery to help condense insights and point towards future concepts and imaginaries. For instance, in a study on a chronic illness, we noticed that our clients were caught up in a narrative that patients never took initiative to seek help because they felt too embarrassed about their condition. The reality we saw in the field was that patients didn't take initiative because they had developed coping mechanisms in lieu of medical help they could not access. As a shorthand for our client to understand that their patients were not wallowing in embarrassment but rather going about their lives with the strategies they had discovered on their own, we referred to these as their "superpowers" early in our narrative – it was a hyperbole, and we complicated the concept further into the story, but it helped jolt our clients and get them out of their familiar frameworks.

2. **Metaphoric models and visualizations:** How do we extrapolate from dozens of observations a more abstract model, concept, or image that conveys a higher truth or a deeper meaning behind the experiences of the field? Poetry can help us to de-familiarize and re-familiarize, so that we draw contrasts and comparisons with freshness – whether it is to make sense of something unfamiliar and new, or to see anew something thought to be banal or commonplace. Applied anthropologist Anne Line Dalsgaard describes an extended metaphor she used to encapsulate two different types of organizational cultures – the wolf pack and the beehive, and how

this helped her stakeholders make sense of their everyday office contexts and determine what worked in company culture and what needed to change (Dalsgaard 2008:151-2, 157).

This is not an argument for distilling thick description into zingers and one-liners, but rather for using poetic form as inspiration in making ideas stick in complex, slow, and indecisive environments. We must be careful not to get carried away by the loose whims of poetry: "What fiction gains from its vividness, freedom to experiment and evocative techniques, it loses in its lack of accuracy, empirical comprehensiveness and attempt to establish interesting comparative dimensions" (Eriksen 1994:193). We must not mistake jargon, business buzzwords, and industry taglines for poetry – overuse of bloated but ultimately empty words like 'connectedness' and 'patient-centered' and 'care' runs rampant in the industries we work for and in. We must strive for precision, specificity, and the imagining of new potentials. Fortun, in her call for ethnographic experimentation with form, writes, "It is not about writing beautifully, or rendering people and events poignantly. And poetics don't license texts without order. The challenge is to put things together inventively, to order them in a way that reorders reader's experience" (2010:xii). As with the screenplay and the novel, drawing inspiration from poetry is less about the written words, and more about the tools for thinking in fresh ways.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURES

At the heart of this paper is the belief that as our work in applied ethnography moves further into contexts that demand us to be practical, efficient, and to-the-point, and to delve into the scientific, the quantitative, and the mechanical, it is actually our connection to the humanities that can give us ingenuity of thought and impactful outcomes. As Thomas describes, our work has the potential to be long-lasting:

> There is a longevity to the ethnographic arts: a report referred back to over the years, a photo that captures a critical moment and still resiliently fresh truth, a chart of a common practice that renders it momentarily foreign and, as a result, suddenly intelligible. In cruder words, ethnographic analysis has a longer shelf life than, say, traditional market research. The latter requires tending, updating, refreshing to keep the demographic or other categories replete with a fresh cast of characters. The former is distinguished by a methodological discipline that keeps it fresh and truthful without the necessity of being, for only the moment, a truth. (Thomas 2010:237)

We believe that literary genres can help us to further the resonance in our work and extend its shelf life. Imagining we are playwrights or documentary filmmakers when we frame the interactions we want to have in the field can help ensure that we gather the thick descriptions we seek. Thinking like a novelist when we analyze our fieldwork experiences and the lives of the individuals we meet can help to better make sense of our qualitative data, especially when working in teams or with other stakeholders, to generate insights. Flexing our skills, however limited, in poetic language can help us to mobilize our data and insights into recommendations that stick. These genres can help address challenges particular to applied ethnography – field guides often turning into survey questionnaires, insights that do not crystalize or go deep enough, and recommendations suffering from a lack of sticking

power. These of course are the challenges that come with the pressure to do our work faster and cheaper, and the need to deliver on goals and timelines set by stakeholders.

Our attempt here is to keep applied ethnography grounded in its humanistic roots even as forays into data science – the theme of this year's EPIC conference – entice us with new potentials. But it is worth making some speculations about how these literary genres could actually help applied ethnographers to better work with data science. Using a creative writing lens could perhaps help data scientists consider the 'why' or 'how' behind their quantitative data, and consider possibilities or gaps that can be explored through qualitative research – in short, thinking like a novelist could help data scientists realize the blind spots of context in their data. For instance, in their case study at this year's EPIC conference, Wachmann et. al. explore the challenge of integrating big data to ethnographic insights on why people visit a theme park in the UAE. The 'data lake' available was on individuals, rather than groups, making it difficult to further analyze how people bond, or don't, at a theme park – a key qualitative insight in the study (Wachmann et. al. 2018). If data scientists could look at their data patterns and data collection frameworks early on in a literary way – thinking of how the numbers might represent the actions or motivations of characters in a story, for instance – it might help them imagine the contexts of their data, and what further knowledge is needed to really make sense of that data. Are people dragged to the theme park because they have to be, à la *National Lampoon's Vacation*? Is it a romantic place of discovery à la *Adventureland*, or a daring escape, à la *Zombieland*? Such imaginaries – the story behind the numbers – could help expand the thinking beyond funnels of efficiencies, pointing to relevant further studies on underlying motivators, needs, and challenges, and pointing to new metrics (such as measuring groups rather than individuals) that could be collected.

In the reverse direction, thinking like a data scientist might help applied ethnographers ensure their poetic concepts are ultimately grounded in concrete observations. For instance, in a recent global study on the future of shopping, we at ReD Associates used the concept of 'fluid living' (Bauman 2005) to make sense of, and elevate, several observations about the changing structures of contemporary life that were impacting shopping habits. When we then integrated a large quantitative study to further develop and size our insights, we needed to make sure that the evocative language was still pinned to concrete, specific behaviors that could be measured. This helped us stay grounded even as we sought abstract connections and concepts that made our ideas memorable for our clients. Obviously these two ways that a literary approach can work with ethnography and data science – imagining new contexts to probe at the 'why' behind numbers, and staying concrete and specific to size and measure abstract concepts – are initial suggestions explored very briefly, but we hope this helps move the conversation forward on combining humanities and social science with data science.

As we've outlined throughout the paper, when taking inspiration from literary genres we must use them to stick to – and to see new – truths from the field, rather than to feel we can take creative liberties with the data. Data, even when it is quantitative, can be misinterpreted and misconstrued – so this is a warning for any kind of cross-disciplinary work we do in ethnography, not just with the literary. We must, as Clifford states, "tell stories we believe to be true" (Clifford 2010b:121). Thinking like a playwright or a documentary filmmaker in the framing phase of a project does not mean prescribing what participants will do and say in the field. Thinking like a novelist upon return from the field does not mean making up characters that do not exist, filling in motives or introspections we have no proof of, or fabricating experiences from the field. Thinking like a poet in developing concepts and

recommendations that stick should not mean flattening or reducing truths and human experiences to empty palatable terms. There is a "fundamental separatedness" between ethnography and the literary that we cannot forget as we experiment – "[t]he *methodological* challenge when using creative writing, whether as a means of exploration or as a knowledge source, is to bear in mind the distinction between fact and fiction" (Hemer 2016:177). Failing to keep in mind these distinctions, and to keep in mind the aims of ethnography, can lead to pitfalls – such as proscriptive fieldwork experiences, fabricated stories, and hollow terms – that tarnish the value we bring to the industries we work in.

As applied ethnographers, we often struggle with being neither-here-nor-there – straddling disciplines, organizational departments and divisions, or roles in a team. But this can often be our strength, as Reese et.al. highlight when they describe the "hyper-skilling" of the ethnographer and how a "road to practical effectiveness (and professional fulfillment) lies in recasting the role of the ethnographer as inter-disciplinary mediator" (Reese et.al. 2010:3). We suggest here that the shapeshifting, nebulous task of doing and writing ethnography in applied contexts can too benefit from leaning in to this interdisciplinary ethos. Indeed, "[e]thnography is hybrid textual activity: it traverses genres and disciplines" (Clifford 2010a:25-6). Playing with literary genres, like the screenplay, the novel, and poem, to reshape our thinking in projects can perhaps bring us more effectiveness, fulfillment, and impact in the work that we do.

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