



## ANTHROPOLOGICAL INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN NEW REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES AND NEW DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

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*Digital ethnography*  
*Representation*  
*Surrogate motherhood*  
*Metaphor*  
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### ABSTRACT

*The digital turn in anthropology and ethnography is not a sudden rupture to the field's epistemological quest. In recent years, after the visual turn and the evolution of Digital Humanities, there have been notable efforts to address the digital aspect of social reality by several anthropologists worldwide. However, the focus has been predominantly on the observation of internet cultures and communities, mainly tackling phenomena that 'take place' in the digital realm, and on the techniques and issues that arise from conducting online research with limited contributions to the theoretical ramifications of recent advancements on the technological front. We argue that the methodological repercussions of the discussion around digital ethnographic writing modalities have not yet been adequately addressed, which reflects a wider tendency of the anthropological lens to remain on the "observant" side of things and not partake in the active discussion and practices regarding knowledge production and representation.*

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## 1. Introduction

Definitions of digital humanities have long demonstrated a tension between a computer-based framework and the culturally-oriented appropriation of digital media (Nyhan, Terras, & Vanhoutte, 2013). Information technologies and the humanities are often seen as antithetical and very few approaches examine them as a spectrum of the same questioning wherein the digital aspect is part of the humanities' interrogation and the sociocultural is reflected in all aspects of digital culture. Common themes that have caught the attention of digital humanities' recent work include networking and friendship, education, safety, access and surveillance, data management, economic and governmentality, and archival /museum handling and museum computing (Sartori, 2015). Some of the most prominent issues that arise from this vibrant research area are digital subjectivities and the incorporation of ethnography in the studies of rhetoric in digital humanities (Ridolfo, & Hart-Davidson, 2015) as well as the problematization of material culture as imprinted in the representation of knowledge-bearing artifacts. Collections that investigate digital phenomena across disciplinary boundaries show that such representation requires scholars to make explicit what they know about their material and to understand the ways in which that material exceeds or escapes representation, especially when dealing with "large amounts of [computer-mediated] material that has been encoded and processed according to a rigorous, well-thought-out system of knowledge representation" (Schreibman, Siemens & Unsworth, 2008). Therefore, the problem of representation and knowledge fabrication lies at the heart of the emerging field of digital humanities.

What is more, digital ethnography presents many affinities with feminist ethnography as far as the main theoretical and methodological problematics are concerned to the extent that one might trace a parallel turn in reflexive practices between the two sub-fields. On the one hand, on a methodological level, a focus on gender in ethnography corresponded with greater reflexivity with respect to the contexts of

knowledge production, such as in the work of Ruth Behar (1996) or Kamala Visweswaran (1994), who examine women's lives and the practice of feminist ethnography (see also Behar and Gordon, 1995). On the other hand, the increasing focus on the visual (e.g., Pink, 2007; Banks & Ruby, 2001) and the senses (cf. Howes & Classen, 2013) at the turn of the century similarly came with new methods and ways of introspection in order to challenge dominant ways of 'knowing' and 'researching' that privilege particular senses (cf. Strathern, 2004) thus triggering the epistemological quest about the construction of knowledge and the ownership of academic (and 'local') knowledge.

Our work, which examines practices of surrogate motherhood in Greece and seeks to narrate the ethnographic material through fictional multimedia digital environments, is situated on the intersection of such ethnographic, feminist and media studies interrogations and attempts to resist the established format of academic and ethnographic writing (lecture, paper, book etc.) and provide alternative spaces for conceptual and affective problematization through the convergence of ethnographic writing, feminist writing and digital fictional writing.

## 2. Digital media and ethnographic concerns

There is a distinctive genealogy in reflexive discussions about representation that have evolved from the textual to the visual and more recently to the digital 'turn' in anthropology.

In the past 40 years, media anthropology has mostly been about technologies of communication; however, it is very difficult to separate the operation of communicational media cleanly from broader social-political processes of circulation, exchange, imagination and knowing (Boyer, 2012). Examining mass media production in the mid-twentieth century, and media reception after the 1970s, the anthropology of media in recent years follows the crisis of representation (Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Clifford, 1988, Minh-ha, 1989; Clifford, 2015) and problematizes the uses of technology in ethnography (Askew, 2002) in documenting

colonial, national and global hegemonic projects. From the documentation of the internet as enabling identity and community expressions (Miller & Slater, 2000), we have moved on to more sophisticated questions about to move away from reductionism, naturalization, essentialism and binary oppositions that prevailed the analysis of early anthropological work on the power of technology (carried out by Bateson, Mead and Boaz). Anthropologists do not view media technologies as scientific modes of cultural documentation or as technical means to capture 'the truth' anymore. Furthermore, media technologies are not restricted to visual forms.

Visual research and representation in anthropology has been rapidly growing during the last thirty years, with many interesting contributions on a theoretical and methodological level, such as the problematization of representing visual knowledge, the technical means of capturing and reproducing cultural conceptualizations, and the hypermedia as anthropological texts (Pink et al, 2004). Digital culture was the first to enter the anthropological methodological array, through the use of visual empirical material since the mid-twentieth century (Berry, 2012) in the form of what we call visual anthropology, which has always been "inherently interdisciplinary" (Kalantzis, 2017) as the act of studying the production and consumption of the meaning of visually perceived objects. In the work implemented in recent years (Horst&Miller, 2012; Pink, 2015; Boellstorff, 2012; Barendregt, 2012) we observe a tendency on the part of 'digital ethnography' towards the problematization of all aspects of anthropological work: politics and relationships, visibility, temporality and space practices, infrastructures but also the importance of art and play in contemporary digital spheres, as well as the elements of design that guide the production of knowledge (Hjorth, Horst, Galloway & Bell, 2017). Many authors address the 'anthropology of our times' as a more public discipline that speaks up about current controversial issues (Bangstad, 2017), especially through such digital means as digital protest and as the hashtag ethnography (Bonilla & Rosa,

2015) and treats 'people' as an effective political concept (Badiou et al, 2016).

As Athanasiou (2004) points out, the internet, an archive of cultural processes and dynamics, is also a lab for reflection and critique. Internet ethnography (Athanasiou, 2004) has not only set new correlations between 'local', 'global' and 'cosmopolitan' localities, but it has also redefined the anthropological conceptions of the body, the senses, the experience, the community, and ethnographic time, further nuancing the discipline's highlighted concepts such as population, community, public sphere, social interaction, but also ethnographic time, cultural intimacy and familiarity, participant observation and ethnographic text. Athanasiou(2004) follows Escobar in asking: How does cyberculture transform these modern arrangements of life (body, self, nature), labor (production, economy) and language (speech, communication)? In attempting to answer such questions while practicing ethnography, our tentative answer is that the ethnographer is not an observer anymore and cannot stay comfortably behind the written text as a quasi-invisible yet authoritative voice. The transformations which have already taken place in most areas of the everyday social life demand fresh lenses of interrogation and, equally important, new modalities of ethnographic 'writing'. This comes in accordance with recent research that is oriented towards more visualization in sociology and anthropology (Pauwels, 2015) promoting the idea of the visual researcher as producer, facilitator, and communicator who employs genres such as the visual essay –a blending of art and social science that is a work in process and as a scholarly form resides in the synergy of the distinct of expression that is combined – images, words, layout and design – and that add up to a scientifically informed statement (Pauwels, 2015: 139-166). Pink (2004) suggests that to close the divide between visual and mainstream anthropology requires not simply new ethnographic film forms but also anthropological texts that combine and mutually situate visual and written ethnographic materials with anthropological theory. She claims that hypermedia offers one route towards such anthropology that allows the visual to make

critical insights that inspire us to rethink the way anthropological arguments are conventionally constructed (Pink, 2004: 164) within a media-oriented production of knowledge.

The scrutiny of our own discursive devices leads to the discussion of the media used in ethnographic work and writing. The anthropology of media has long acknowledged representation of self and others, the relation of technology to truth and the active audiences as the key components of (textual/narrative) mediation across cultures (Askew, 2002). Mostly focusing on photography and video, the early discussion raised some intriguing questions about the mediation of cultures and the production of identities through partial representations of cultural instances. Anthropology has made peace with this understanding of represented social reality and might now endeavor on a more adventurous terrain, given that technological opportunity makes it possible and even imperative (in terms of reading practices and modalities of understanding and every day communicating in the west).

In tracing the historically based avoidance of anthropology to engage with technological mediation, Papailias(2013) shows that the rhetorical solutions offered by the literary crisis of anthropology in the 1990s (dialogic experimentation), however useful in placing reflexivity and self-criticism at the core over the anthropological endeavor, did not offer a let out from the crisis. Rather, professionalization anthropology was implemented on the degradation and annulation of other practices of cultural documentation. It was only after the incorporation of Foucauldian perspectives in anthropology which facilitated the transition from the textual analysis of the representation of the other to the anthropological discourse and the analysis of processes of cultural categorization, racial taxonomy and political distinction of the local population in the context of colonial government (Papailias, 2013: 38).

Writing is thus inscribed in the realm of technology, and we are nowadays epistemologically encouraged to challenge some of the dogmata that run through one of the strongest western metaphors for thinking and

acknowledge that the very process of writing constitutes a way of constructing, producing, circulating and representing cultural knowledge. Despite the international trend that encourages neologisms, such as 'netnography' (Kozinets, 2010) the extent of experimentation does not seem to considerably affect the processes of writing and re-presenting digitally collected data; in most cases, the discussion limits itself to 'what natives do' on a digital sphere or, alternatively, articulating a virtual ethnography is mostly seen as an easy, accessible way to disseminate cultural information in a postcolonial task of bringing forth 'the aboriginal voice' (Galliford, 2013).

Ethnographers who embrace the technology make strong claims regarding the usefulness of hypertext, suggesting that hypertext might alter the ways that we represent experiences from the field and create more reflexive texts (Pink, 2007) through multilinearity, multivocality, and multimodality. In order to perform hypertext and/or transmedia ethnography, research is usually informed from various digital literary approaches, a flourishing experimental field that ranges from perspectives of game studies, social and ubiquitous computing, to e-literature, and visualization, among many others (Siemens &Schreibman, 2013), which stress on the transformation of disciplines that has taken place in recent years on account of the technologization of language (Fairclough cited in Thurlow&Mroczek, 2011: xxiv), but also on the evolution of media methods both in traditional fields such as cinema and telecommunication as well as evolving themes is the extraction of big data, virtual photography, cybernetics and so on (Arthur & Bode, 2014).

Most such approaches take hybridity as a given and attend instead to the inherent multimodality and cultural embeddedness of these different ways of (inter)acting with/through new media and underline that practice and creative generative research methods are almost a requirement for digital humanities to remain a flourishing realm of study. New media sociolinguistics, when studying (not the "grammatical" language of linguistics, but rather the everyday life of language in use —or just discourse), recognize a

series of creative genres in digital discourse, including texting, messaging and multimodality in everyday communication. What is useful for the anthropologist to acknowledge is that all texts, all communicative events, are always achieved by means of multiple semiotic resources, even so-called text-based new media like instant- and text messaging (e.g., text messaging, mobile storytelling and microblogging) (Thurlow&Mroczek, 2011). Therefore, the turn to the user-generated content and the new narrativity formats that spring from the digital media inevitably promote an experimental tendency in the ways we think and, reflect on and produce/disseminate ethnographic information (Manovich, Malina&Cubitt, 2001). Herein lies much of the potential in new media for innovation and creativity; “time and again, research shows how users overcome apparent semiotic limitations, reworking and combining—often playfully—the resources at their disposal. These approaches illuminate that it is the situated, spatialized (which is not to say static) experiences of new media that are also crucial to an understanding of their meaning” (Thurlow&Mroczek, 2011: xxvi).

Moving away from both visual and textual bias, we adopt a transmedia approach to this ethnography in order to investigate the extent to which a mediation of ethnographic meaning is attainable by employing fiction and multimodality. The term media implies two or more poles of engagement. “Media technologies do not mediate between themselves and people. Rather, they mediate (*medius*: middle) between people and this is what defines them as a distinct variety of technology” (Askew, 2002: 2). If the understanding of mediation ceases to rely on substantialist and essentialist models of culture, then it becomes apparent that technology does not occur after or outside culture but is in itself the foundation of most activity nowadays (Mazzarella, 2004), where cultural technologies and practices and technological mediations produce contemporary meanings. In this orientation, ethnography has a responsibility to expose the centrality of mediation in contemporary communication, kinship (Madianou& Miller, 2013), but also religion and

education. After the anthropology of new media and the limitation of research to digital technology as a research tool, the challenge for digital anthropology is to accurately build up analytic categories from which we may be able to capture the complex imbrications of technology and society (Sassen, 2002). In this context, many fields within cultural anthropology have emerged with different degrees of confidence — for example, anthropology of technology (Hess, 1992), anthropology of cyberculture (Escobar, 2000 et al.) and cyberspace, “virtual ethnography (Miller and Slater, 2000; Hine, 2015), anthropology of information technology (Born, 1997) or multimedia anthropology (Biella, 1993)” (cited in Cohen and Salazar, 2005: 5).

### 3. Multiple mediations: Reproducing bodies, technologies, texts

The technological component has been very prominent in assisted reproduction and anthropological work has tied the gendered technologies to the reproductive ones from early on (Martin, 1987). In this sense, the HYFRESMO<sup>1</sup> research project is a continuation of the problematics raised by second and third wave feminisms, as to the extent that gender is a performative work, facilitated by the critical reappraisal of the norms imposed by material anatomy and human technologies. In a sense, what is largely reflected in popular culture but also in public and private space, is a shift from household technologies being linked to female gender to reproductive technologies, becoming a symbol of emancipatory endeavors. In this context, the equally emancipatory potential of digital narrative technology is registered in the

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<sup>1</sup> The research project “Ethnography and/as hypertext fiction: representing surrogate motherhood” (HYFRESMO) employs the emerging social practice of surrogate motherhood as a focal point in order to differently address digital ethnographic textuality. Its aim is threefold: firstly, it attempts an ethnographic study of surrogate motherhood, qualitatively approached via participant observation and interviewing ‘pairs of mothers’ (the surrogate and the social mother). Secondly, it seeks to interrogate the practices of ethnographic writing by proposing that research findings may be presented in a form of fiction writing, namely short stories. Thirdly, it supports the opening up of the ethnographic text in new forms of mediation, by attempting the creation of an ethnographic hypertext with links to multimedia material (papers, videos & photos, interview recordings and excerpts) that will facilitate the non-linear reading of fictional ethnography and its access by non-expert readers.

same interrogating matrix, when the generative qualities of the media may be used in order to describe the generative traits of new reproductive technologies. As Haraway(1997) reminds us, to study technoscience requires immersion in worldly material-semiotic practices, where the analysts, as well as the humans and non-humans studied, are all at risk - morally, politically, technically and epistemologically. Science studies that do not take on that kind of situated knowledge practice stand a good chance of floating off-screen into an empyrean and academic never-never land. 'Ethnography', in this extended sense, is not so much a specific procedure in anthropology, as it is a method of being at risk in the face of the practices and discourses into which one inquires (Haraway, 1997: 39), which pushes forward the entanglement of people with (media and reproductive) technologies.

Our research work moves to situate itself on the tension within media anthropology between its common research foci (which are most often technological or representational in their basis) and what we might gloss as processes of social mediation: i.e. social transaction in its broadest sense of the movement of images, discourse, persons and things. In this respect, we join the turn that sees 'mediation' became a significant presence within the analytical language of media anthropology wherein the ethnographer is also producer and receiver of mediated meaning (for discussion, see Boyer, 2012: 386). In a way returning to the root of a central anthropological discussion, our experimentation with transmedia ethnography reminds us McLuhan's proclamation that 'the medium is the message' in ethnographically illustrating that researching new media communications, new modalities of understanding and relating require, if not demand, new representational instruments.

We believe that this view also places digital anthropological practice in the wider area of material culture and the centrality that the human body has in this strand of ethnographic interest. Indeed, most approaches that problematize material culture deal with the human body, in one way or another. For example, in Tilley's work (2017[1994]) on the phenomenology of landscape, he makes an

interesting point in correlating spatial narrativity with the landscape and the art of narration. He notes that the praxis of movement is an act of understanding space (as incubating both place and time), so the description of a place is also already a description of a bodily movement and a shifting landscape, that allows for narrative understanding. Such discussions bring us to an interesting strand that ties surrogacy to transmedia ethnography: the concept of mediation. We make the case that if ever motherhood/pregnancy and writing/reading used to be considered linear, personal, and monodimensional they are not anymore. Both processes have undergone major cultural reconceptualization and are now multiply mediated (by medical, technological, temporal, legal and other cultural practices and discourses).

Following a long genealogy of women who have assisted, and have in fact mediated in the process of other women to become mothers, and practices of mediating intimacy (Grayson, 1998) we trace a parallel between mediated parenthood and mediated ethnography. In our examination, the models of mediated motherhood documented cross-culturally, Wilkie's (2003) archaeological account example of African-American midwives presents some interesting points about the archaeologies of mothering and caring before the medical professionals took hold of the scene of reproduction and systemically defamed midwives and helpers in an over-medicalized view of birth. For example, midwives who were already mothers assisted and indeed initiated pregnant women into the processes of mothering (Wilkie, 2003: xix) which much resembles surrogates who have already had children serving as generational and gender mediators (Wilkie, 2000). Drawing from her work with surrogate mother in the ethnography of Israel, Teman notes: "[i]ntended mothers read pregnancy guides, construct pregnant identities, exhibit bodily signs of pseudopregnancy, and even engage in couvade-like behaviors during the delivery. These processes are strengthened by interactions in which surrogates engage in caregiving practices toward intended mothers, becoming what I have likened to *midwives* to

other women's motherhood" (Teman, 2010: 284; our emphasis).

This coincides with recent feminist views on the technosocial understanding of the female body and processes of physical reproduction. In Rosi Braidotti's work (2011) the notion of 'the human' is both de-stabilized by technologically mediated social relations in a globally connected world and is thrown open to contradictory redefinitions, arguing for a sustainable modern subjectivity as one in flux, never opposed to a dominant hierarchy yet intrinsically other, always in the process of becoming, and perpetually engaged in dynamic power relations both creative and restrictive. The central concern in this framework is the constructive theorization of post-humanity, as well as the multiple aspects of the experience of techno-cultural somatization, where multiple processes of mediation are pivotal in the cultural conceptualizations of reproduction that merge the boundaries between the human and the technological. The theoretical starting point of such reasoning is that the subject and object of anthropology must shift from the exclusive focus to "human" so that more complex "post-institutional" forms of subjectivity and cultural action can be detected (Athanasίου, 2004: 66-67).

The interrelation between gender and technology lies in the core of our problematics. As Haraway (1997) notes "[b]roadly conceptualized reproductive practices must be central to social theory in general, and to technoscience studies in particular". This very interrelation has been the object of attentive study ever since the 'new reproductive technologies' gained attention from prospective mothers/parents and theorists alike. Historians of technology have identified the aspect of reproductive technologies as one of the prominent areas of interest in late modernity, along with the limited presence of women in the design and sciences of technology, the gendered use and consumption of technological artefacts and the multiple masculinities associated with gender (Rendezi, 2012: 44). What has great interest in the genealogy of this relation is the traditional apprehension of women as consumers and passive users of technology (which is traditionally designed and circulated

by men), a thesis that has been widely contested by historians and anthropologists, who have proved that both gender and technology are culturally constructed concepts in constant resignification and mutual interrelation.

According to this view, the technology is interesting in the present research in two distinct ways: on the one hand, in bringing the reproductive technologies to the forefront and accentuating their role in processes of surrogate motherhood (here the ethnographers intend to utilize various forms of documentation to make these instruments and artefacts visible, along with their conceptualizations by both the social and the surrogate mother); on the other hand, in dynamically utilizing the technological advancements in communication and new media in order to document, comment upon, and represent the ethnographic subject(s). Furthermore, the research is interesting in illuminating the body of the surrogate as the ultimate technology that social mothers "use", often after a long series of attempts and trials with other technologically prescribed instruments (injections, pills, scans, and insemination/examination infrastructure). This line of questioning follows the strand of Donna Haraway's early hybrid take on the human (1992), in introducing the cyborg and stressing the technological advancements that have blurred the very limits between body and machine, nature and culture. Adopting her view of fragmented and perpetually re-organized individual and collective selves, we find that the surrogate features as the ultimate case study for highlighting the collapse between technological and human mechanics and the ethnographic representation of such a phenomenon can only be documented by employing the available technologies in analogous hybrid and subversive ways (cf. Balsamo, 1996).

Furthermore, the stance of technology-as-text,<sup>2</sup> open to multiple interpretations by users as well as observers, presents an opportunity to move away from technological determinism and gender essentialism alike and try to understand the subtle interrelations, overlaps, and tensions between the two. Moving away from the old

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<sup>2</sup> Text refers to any cultural product (aural, visual, tactile or otherwise) open to interpretation.

argument about submissive passive consumers of technology and granting them agency and performative power, this research draws a parallel between the mediated process of surrogacy and the mediated character of digital transmedia narration. The idea of mediation of bodily matter, kinship ties as politics of knowing (Herzfeld, 2007), affective relations in the case of surrogacy and the mediation of ethnographic meaning is at the core of an experimental ethnography as we view it. Bodily technologies become the technology of constructing gender itself; therefore, a project that uses mainstream multimedia technology in order to narrate the microphysics of bodily and affective experience, thus collapsing the commonplace distinction between “hard” and “soft” technology (i.e. serious and male-oriented artefacts of science and industry vs. everyday small-scale and private technologies destined for female use), lies in the heart of post-modern feminist ethnography, especially in a field that evokes “transnational feminist” practices such as global reproductive technologies (Gupta, 2006).

#### 4. Closing remarks

The research project “Ethnography and/as hypertext fiction: representing surrogate motherhood” is situated on the verge of a cultural shift, when normative ideologies and ‘innovative’ practices forge a discursive terrain of tension, convergence and the potential for articulating new gendered and cultural meanings. We argue that if writing inevitably relates to privilege, subjugated knowledge, established ‘truths’ and emergent ‘antilogues’, then “academic” authoring embraces temporal and spatial locations, and the becoming of writing is characterized by activism and the aesthetics of resistance, in urgently addressing the question of how writing shapes knowledge. This is directly linked to the aim of theorizing the post-disciplinary character of feminist studies “as an interdisciplinary field that is established but retains a ‘transversal’ and ‘dialogical’ openness in relation to other fields, through an

intersectional lens of inquiry” (Lykke, 2010: 18). Since academic writing has often failed to engage with the ways of apprehension of non-academic audiences, research-based fiction may be an answer to a wider politics of representation and sharing research findings. Furthermore, even though fiction writing may be viewed as promoting the singularity of authorship on the part of the ethnographer, the replacement of academic jargon with literary fiction might actually diminish the effect of this authoritative voice and re-shift the focus on research subjects’ experience (here: surrogate motherhood) through a multimedia and multi-vocal fictional ethnography. We argue that a writing modality that somehow “follows” or “imitates” the cultural practice it seeks to describe/address falls within this wide epistemological questioning, as it has recently been enabled by technical means and tools. What we hope to achieve through fictional transmedia ethnography of surrogate motherhood is the creation of a new discursive-ethnographic space that “accurately” reflects new sensibilities and manners of registering the “non-tellable” of social reality and/or practicing motherhood. We ultimately argue that reality can only be phenomenologically perceived, and thus never truly objectively observable. Nonetheless, this angle does not bypass reality as a mere fabrication and releases the creative instinct of the ethnographer untamed; it is rather a call for meticulous efforts to engage the fieldwork interlocutors and the fellow researchers in an imaginative quest, which allows space for the metaphorical, the mythical, the irrational, the playful and the fictional to account for reality as much as orthodox, recordable and analyzable data are considered to be ‘reflective’ of the ‘real’. In this framework, the parallel shifts that this paper draws between new reproductive technologies and new digital technologies have the potential to illuminate an anthropological angle for innovative discursive engagement with written and cultural ‘texts’ which defy monolithic and rigid conceptualizations of parenthood and readership alike.



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