

## MIT Open Access Articles

*Transmedia as experimental ethnography: The Exit Zero Project, deindustrialization, and the politics of nostalgia*

The MIT Faculty has made this article openly available. **Please share** how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

**Citation:** Walley, Christine J. "Transmedia as Experimental Ethnography: The Exit Zero Project, Deindustrialization, and the Politics of Nostalgia." *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 4 (October 2015): 624–639. © 2015 by the American Anthropological Association

**As Published:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/amet.12160>

**Publisher:** Wiley Blackwell

**Persistent URL:** <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/108104>

**Version:** Author's final manuscript: final author's manuscript post peer review, without publisher's formatting or copy editing

**Terms of use:** Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike



CHRISTINE J. WALLEY

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Transmedia as experimental ethnography:

The Exit Zero Project, deindustrialization, and the politics of nostalgia

American Ethnologist, Volume 42 Number 4 November 2015

[ABSTRACT: How might “transmedia” approaches—or working across media—fit into histories of textual and visual innovation within anthropology, and what might they contribute to the discipline in the current moment? I explore this question through the Exit Zero Project, which includes a book, documentary film, and planned interactive website that examine the impact of deindustrialization on Southeast Chicago and the relationship between industrial job loss and expanding class inequalities in the United States. While the book and film take an “autoethnographic” approach, the website is based on collaboration with a local museum. I argue that transmedia ethnography both provokes new research questions and supports a growing interest in public anthropology by offering diverse spaces for engagement with subjects and audiences. [*transmedia, deindustrialization, social class, Chicago, anthropology of U.S.*]

The Exit Zero Project is an anthropological exploration of the effects of deindustrialization in Southeast Chicago and the links between industrial job loss and expanding class inequality in the United States. It has been more than a decade in the making. As a project, it builds on traditions of anthropological experimentation with text, image, and aural forms as well as on the novel possibilities that online forms can offer. The first two components of the project—a book and documentary film—weave together

the personal stories of my father—a former steelworker—along with my own stories and those of other relatives and neighbors from this formerly industrial community. The third component—an in-progress online archive and storytelling site—is a collaborative project with a local community-based museum. In this article, I trace how working across media has shaped Southeast Chicago residents’ interactions with the Exit Zero Project while also transforming the nature and direction of the ethnographic research itself. More broadly, I argue that “transmedia” approaches provide diverse spaces for engagement with both subjects and audiences, offering valuable possibilities for expanded dialogue in an era of growing inequality.

An increasing number of anthropologists employ multiple media in their ethnographic practice. “Transmedia” ethnography is one direction for such work. It involves not simply utilizing different media (as “multimedia” approaches might) or adapting a work from one medium to another but extending an ethnographic narrative and analysis across media forms, with each component making a unique contribution to the whole. Although the term *transmedia* was originally used to refer to fictional entertainment—pop culture scholar Henry Jenkins, for example, uses it to refer to “emergent forms of [commercial] storytelling which tap into the flow of content across media and the networking of fan response” (2003)—I employ it here in relation to documentary and ethnographic practice.<sup>1</sup>

Anthropology, of course, has long histories of experimentation with the possibilities and limits of ethnographic presentation and form. Alfred Cort Haddon took a film camera to the Torres Straits in 1898, early fieldworkers recorded songs and oral histories on wax cylinders, ethnographers published glossy photographs in their books,

museum anthropologists placed material artifacts center stage, and ethnographic filmmakers pioneered new forms of documentary, sometimes working across text and film (Brady 1999; Griffiths 1996, 2001; Hochman 2014).<sup>2</sup> Although the question of how and whether anthropologists should engage with various media, including sound and still and moving images, has sometimes been a source of tension within the discipline (Griffiths 1996, 2001),<sup>3</sup> such eclectic projects are the precursors to contemporary transmedia work that continues to seek a variety of sensory pathways into anthropological knowledge. Today's transmedia ventures, however, must also be located within the outpouring of ethnographic experimentation that responded to the postcolonial, literary, and feminist critiques of the 1980s and 1990s, often shorthand as the "Writing Culture" debates (see, e.g., Abu-Lughod 1991; Behar and Gordon 1996; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Fox 1991; Marcus and Fischer 1986). Such experimentation has sought to rethink anthropologists' relationships to their subjects as well as to explore the nature of anthropology's disciplinary borders, considering what marks—and does not mark—anthropology off from fiction writing, autobiography, visual media, and art practice.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I offer a reflexive and grounded exploration of the Exit Zero Project as one attempt to think and work across media forms, and I ask what such efforts can contribute to contemporary anthropology. The book *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Post-Industrial Chicago* (Walley 2013) and the documentary film *Exit Zero: An Industrial Family Story* (Boebel 2015) are both "autoethnographic" in nature, using the stories of my own family to offer an intimate look at how deindustrialization plays out in daily life and to offer a personal lens onto larger transformations. The in-progress website being collaboratively constructed with the all-volunteer Southeast Chicago Historical

Museum extends the focus from a single family to a wide range of families, ethnic and racial groups, and neighborhoods in Southeast Chicago as it has transitioned from a heavily industrialized to a deindustrializing and then to a largely postindustrial region. The website will build on the oral histories, home video, photos, documents, and other artifacts found within the museum to create a “living archive” of community documentation, memory, and storytelling about the effects of deindustrialization in the area (with the hope of linking to websites in other deindustrialized regions in the future).

As the authors of *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (Ginsburg et al. 2002) have emphasized, anthropologists need to consider media—whatever form it takes and including media we ourselves create—as a kind of social practice whose production, circulation, and consumption are situated within broader economic, social, and political fields. Although this article begins with that premise, its intended goal is not to analyze the Exit Zero Project strictly in media terms but to use it as an opportunity to continue conversations with anthropologists (and others) about ethnography as a process, a relationship, and a form of representation. I do so by revisiting the legacy of the “Writing Culture” debates and asking how transmedia work might contribute to ethnographic experimentation and the rethinking of anthropological engagement in the contemporary era. In addition, I explore what transmedia approaches can offer to the ethnographic research process itself. In the case of the Exit Zero Project, I argue, the kind of feedback engendered by its transmedia form has underscored the importance of “witnessing” to the production of collective memory about deindustrialization among Southeast Chicago residents as well as the complex politics of industrial nostalgia in an increasingly postindustrial era. Although the challenges and resources required for transmedia work

are daunting (it should neither be undertaken lightly nor held up as an ideal for all anthropologists), such work can expand anthropology's toolkit by creating diverse spaces for engagement in different registers with both subjects and audiences, generating additional possibilities for the production of a "public anthropology" that sets its sights on the growing inequalities of our era.<sup>5</sup>

Writing, self, and stories:

*The Exit Zero book*

As a text, *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Post-Industrial Chicago* takes an "experimental" form.<sup>6</sup> Stories are at its heart. Some are my own, while others are the personal narratives of people in my family, in the neighborhoods of Southeast Chicago, and in the wider world transformed by the effects of deindustrialization. I was 14 years old when the Southeast Chicago steel mill where my father worked as a shear operator abruptly closed, throwing him and thousands of others out of work. My father's mill was only the first of many in the area to close. Southeast Chicago, where prior generations of my mother's and father's families had come to work, joins together with northwest Indiana and nearby Gary to form the "Calumet" region, once the site of one of the largest concentrations of industry in the world. Even years later, when I was a scholarship student living far from home, I felt a profound need to make sense of the effects of deindustrialization not only in Southeast Chicago and for my own family but more broadly as well. Anthropology became the discipline I looked toward to make sense of these formative experiences.

The *Exit Zero* book, named after the highway exit ramp one takes to reach the old steel-mill neighborhoods (Figure 1), weaves together stories of different generations of

my family in an attempt to convey the historical transformations that occurred in Southeast Chicago and many other formerly industrial regions. It includes the experiences of my white, middle-aged father, who grew up in a setting where being a steelworker was the accepted—often the only conceivable—life path for men. With the shutdown of the steel mills in the 1980s and 1990s, he lost his job, his pension, and his sense of identity. The book also considers the experiences of my mother, who, like many other women, played a central role in the socially dense networks built around the families, churches, and ethnic organizations at the heart of the old industrial neighborhoods. After the mills closed, many women ended up supporting families through poorly paid service jobs with few benefits, such as the “temp” job my mother had at a local oil refinery for nearly 30 years.

Intertwined with these accounts are those of family members from different eras, including a maternal great-grandfather, John Mattson, who emigrated from Sweden to work in the area’s steel mills in 1910. His experience as an immigrant in a region filled with immigrants and migrants (many initially from southern and eastern Europe and, later, from Mexico and the U.S. South) was captured in a memoir he wrote, found stuffed in a paper sack and hidden in my grandmother’s attic after his death. The memoir had the title “The Struggle for Existence from the Cradle to the Grave” scrawled across the front and recounted the difficult times my great-grandfather faced as an immigrant to the United States and the dangers of working in the steel mills. Another thread follows my paternal grandfather who was shot at by police in the 1937 labor struggle known as the Memorial Day Massacre, an infamous event in which ten steelworkers fighting for the right to unionize were killed. These intertwined stories of multiple generations also came to

include the stories of my younger self as I tried to make sense of my own feelings of alienation as a “first generation” scholarship student at elite schools in other parts of the country. In addition, these stories shed light on how class comes to be literally embodied in a landscape made toxic by histories of both industrial manufacturing and postindustrial waste disposal.

The project began modestly in the early 1990s with family stories captured on audiotape and odd scraps of paper for a master’s thesis about deindustrialization in Southeast Chicago. Although I eventually did doctoral fieldwork in and wrote a book about another part of the world, I felt a deep need to return to this project for personal and intellectual reasons. Posttenure freedom and the support of my family allowed the text to take on its more experimental personal style.<sup>7</sup> Scholars in many disciplines sometimes express discomfort with the presumed narcissism of writing about the self, but anthropologists interested in autobiography and autoethnography have emphasized a truism within anthropology—the self is constituted through its social relationships with others. In other words, what “personal” stories ultimately reveal is the terrain of interpersonal relationships (Okeley and Callaway 1992; Reed-Danahay 1997). Consequently, although this work might be classified as autoethnographic, I prefer the term *intimate ethnography*, coined by anthropologists Alisse Waterston and Barbara Rylko-Bauer (2006) to refer to ethnography conducted in the intimate spaces of family life. (Related projects—although not necessarily conceived by the authors as “intimate ethnography”—can be found in Abu-Lughod 2007, Behar 2007, Pandian and Mariappan 2014, Panourgia 1996, Narayan 2008, and Waterston 2014.)



Academics have long cautioned against simplistic understandings of narratives.<sup>8</sup> Stories such as those found in *Exit Zero* do not provide unmediated access to experience or a window onto daily life: They are no more “real” than other kinds of “data.” Stories are bound up with power and power-laden conventions in the style, content, and contexts of their telling, and they carry no intrinsic political meaning for those who would prefer to see them as closer to “the people.” Stories people tell are also no less instructive than those that don’t get told. Indeed, the Exit Zero Project emphasizes that which is difficult to say or hear in a country where social class remains an often-submerged topic.<sup>9</sup>

Despite such caveats, stories are central to the *Exit Zero* book for a number of reasons. I often felt I had no choice but to approach the project through stories. They were at the heart of what I needed to say and understand about my own past, family, and community, and a storytelling style quickly eclipsed the more academic one that I had originally intended to adopt. The book’s narration also often takes the form of a conversation between two parts of myself—the daughter of a steelworking family and the professional anthropologist. I have not been alone among scholars in resorting to personal accounts to address issues of social class.<sup>10</sup> Sherry Lee Linkon (2014) has even identified personal narrative as the “signature genre” of the emergent interdisciplinary field of working-class studies. The need to tell personal stories that fail to “fit” with societal expectations resonates with accounts of feminist scholars and others who have long noted the pull of such narratives. Many have argued that personal narratives of nondominant groups can be highly revealing given the way they expose dominant viewpoints as particularistic rather than universalistic (e.g., Okeley and Callaway 1992; Ochs and Capps 2001; Steedman 1986). It is in this additional sense that the personal is not only

political but also analytical. Stories were powerful to me as I was growing up in Southeast Chicago because they were a common medium for analyzing everyday life. When I would come home from college and talk with my dad about “big issues,” often using the abstracted language I had learned in school, my father would always counter such rhetorical moves by telling a story. Whether talking about politics, the mills, or the state of the country (as he loved to do), he would poke me on the leg and begin, “Let me tell you, Peanut . . . .” And, then, he would launch into some story that illustrated how he viewed the world. The analysis, for him, as for so many others, was always in the stories.<sup>11</sup>

*Building on the “Writing Culture” debates*

The intellectual basis for the *Exit Zero* book—as for so many other ethnographic experiments in recent decades—can be traced back to the aforementioned foundational period of anthropological reinvention during the 1980s and 1990s. In my own graduate school experience, the volume *Writing Culture* (1986), edited by James Clifford and George Marcus, with its critique of anthropological writing, representation, and authority, was a formative text assigned in no fewer than three different classes. While the debates of the period are often shorthanded through references to *Writing Culture*, work by feminist theorists was equally central to the ferment of the time. In “Partial Truths,” his introductory essay to the *Writing Culture* volume, Clifford (1986) explored the construction of a power-laden ethnographic authority through textual “monologism.” He also critiqued visualism, calling on anthropologists to move beyond thinking of cultures through a power-laden “ethnographic gaze” and to instead emphasize the power of listening, which would reveal a cultural poetics based on a Bakhtinian play of voices:

“Once dialogism and polyphony are recognized as modes of textual production, monophonic authority is questioned” (Clifford 1986:15).

Dialogism is at the center of the Exit Zero Project,<sup>12</sup> but the project’s intellectual basis as an ethnographic experiment with an emphasis on radical particularity builds equally on the feminist theorizing of the same period.<sup>13</sup> Donna Haraway’s (1988) landmark essay on “situated knowledges” argued that the crucial point for theorists is not that knowledge is socially constructed but that it is embodied and produced from within particular social locations. For Haraway, “unlocatable” claims to knowledge are irresponsible because we are all coming from somewhere. Drawing such insights into anthropological debates, Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) suggested that truths are not just “partial,” as Clifford argued, but they are “positioned” in highly particular rather than general ways. Feminist anthropologists were also central in pioneering uses of the personal. In the edited volume *Women Writing Culture*, conceptualized as a feminist corrective to the male-dominated *Writing Culture* volume, Ruth Behar (1995:4) acerbically noted that although women anthropologists had long made use of the personal (including, most strikingly, Zora Neale Hurston), such efforts were often treated with ambivalence until theoretically validated as “reflexive” and “experimental” in light of the “Writing Culture” debates.

In her call to write against the power relations implicit in generalizing about others by “writ[ing] against culture,” Abu-Lughod asked a question shared with the contributors to *Writing Culture*: “Are there ways to write about lives so as to constitute others as less other?” (1991:149). While dialogism is at the heart of *Writing Culture*’s efforts to reposition power relationships with those formerly considered anthropology’s

“informants,” Abu-Lughod suggested that its contributors’ reliance on language from high-status literary and philosophical theory might impose power relationships of its own (just as valorizing nonnarrative writing strategies might work to exclude rather than open access). Instead, she called for other writing strategies, including creating “ethnographies of the particular” that seek to narrow the distance between academic approaches to writing and everyday life by highlighting individuals and families as well as their day-to-day choices, interpretations, strategies, and conflicts. Although her own book of “stories,” *Writing Women’s Worlds* (1993), foregrounds the local, her stated point is not to privilege micro- over macroprocesses but to show that larger processes are always manifested in terms of the particulars of daily life.

In its written ethnographic form, the Exit Zero Project has moved along the paths opened up by such theorizing about dialogism, situated knowledges, and anthropologies of the particular and personal. It seeks an “anthropology of the particular” that does related work but that challenges a different kind of Othering. It underscores that, as individuals, including working-class individuals of a range of ethnicities, we do not simply illustrate history’s larger trends; our lives *are* those histories.<sup>14</sup> It counters the class-based “othering” that comes when residents of deindustrialized regions are either ignored or represented in public discussion simply as objects of statistics, subjects of policy interventions, or causes for public alarm: lives either neglected or reduced to anecdotes in popular accounts of the problems of contemporary U.S. life. It also builds on the recognition that personal narratives readily lend themselves to an acknowledgment of the dialogic and of situated knowledges. As many have noted, the act of storytelling implicitly calls attention to its own dialogical nature by underscoring specific interactions

between speakers and listeners. It also makes it difficult for scholars to play the power-laden “god trick” of pretending to be disembedded from social relations in ways that abstract theorizing can allow. Not only are the various components of the Exit Zero Project intended to be in conversation with each other but the particular materials on which each is built are also recognized to be “dialogic” in nature. As creators of the Exit Zero Project, we are, after all, only one set of cultural producers engaged with the products of other cultural producers, namely, those historical and contemporary Southeast Chicago residents who—in conversation and interaction with others—told stories, created texts, took family photos, made home movies, video-recorded mills being demolished, or collected and invested meaning in material objects.

Twenty years after *Writing Culture*, Marcus (2007) revisited that foundational text. He suggested that the “experimental” ethnography that emerged post-*Writing Culture* has more often ended up as theoretically and stylistically “baroque” rather than as “experimental” in the originally intended sense of being produced in collaborative relation with those previously seen as anthropology’s informants. He called for contemporary anthropologists to redirect attention away from texts and back to the conditions of their ethnographic production in fieldwork (without forgetting the textual critiques learned along the way). He asked for renewed emphasis on the “problems and politics of collaborative relations” (Marcus 2007:1138), for seeing those we work with as reflexive and epistemic partners in joint projects, and for giving greater attention to reception and creating disparate products for divergent audiences. Kim Fortun (2010), in commenting on the *Writing Culture* legacy, also argues for the need to rethink the

“infrastructures” through which we create experimental ethnography—and for placing multimedia work squarely at the center.

At stake is not only how we write but also those we write for and want to be in conversation with. I still vividly recall how alienated I felt, as a working-class teenager, from the social scientific writing styles found in academic books about Southeast Chicago that signaled that they were about us rather than for us. Abu-Lughod has argued that “the very gap between the professional and authoritative discourses of generalization and the languages of everyday life (our own and others’) establishes a fundamental separation between the anthropologist and the people being written about that facilitates the construction of anthropological objects as simultaneously different and inferior” (1991:151). This kind of discursive gap also stymies possibilities for shared conversations. My own attempt to counter such exclusionary tendencies has been to follow the lead of those feminist theorists and ethnographers who emphasize “stories” (even as nonnarrative approaches hold higher status within academia for their presumably more “critical” nature). Telling stories has been central to the *Exit Zero* book, not simply because stories are “accessible” (a problematic term that implies a “dumbing down” of complex material for the masses) but because the call-and-response mode of storytelling extends an invitation to others to join in the discussion. I believe that stories, therefore, offer a greater chance of creating a common—if imperfect—meeting ground for conversation and analysis for those from various backgrounds, whether Southeast Chicago residents, students, academics, community leaders, or others. In the example described here, this storytelling and conversation is happening in transmedia fashion across works, genres, and exploratory platforms.

Stories, voices, and the visual

*The Exit Zero film*

In the mid-1990s, a few years after I began collecting materials for my master's thesis on Southeast Chicago, I brought my future husband, Chris Boebel, to the area to visit my family for the first time. Chris had just finished film school at NYU. As we left Chicago and approached the Indiana toll road, we passed the Exit 0 sign for the old steel-mill neighborhoods (a sign that aptly symbolized the passed-over feeling pervading these formerly industrial neighborhoods). Chris was still reeling from having experienced the weight of deindustrialization both on the area and within my own family. "Someone needs to make a movie about this place," he said, "and they should call it Exit Zero." In the many years since, we have repeatedly returned to Southeast Chicago and are currently putting the final touches on an *Exit Zero* documentary film. Although we were initially tempted to make it in a more conventional and authoritative documentary style with a top-down view of deindustrialization that used individuals' experiences to illustrate larger themes, we quickly decided to flip the perspective and (as in the book) emphasize the personal and familial, letting the particularity of daily lives become the pathway into broader issues. My own voice serves as the guide and narrator through the film in "autoethnographic" fashion. The film was conceived at the same time as the book. Rather than being an adaptation, it was intended to be an independent work as well as a unique component of a "transmedia" experience, adding depth to the overall project.

In addition to the work that went into research for the book, including participant-observation, the taking of field notes, archival research, interviews, and secondary reading, we jointly began the process of shooting and gathering material for the

documentary film, which ultimately included over 100 hours of footage. Chris served as cameraman, director, and, later, editor, and I recorded sound, produced the film, and served as anthropologist. The material ranged from formally shot conventional interviews (material mostly left unused) to countless hours of informal footage of “deep hanging out” in my family home. In shooting the visually dramatic landscape of Southeast Chicago, we explored places I was less likely to go to as a fieldworker habituated to conversation. We visited one of the last remaining steel mills in Gary (where the heat was so intense the camera shut down), the top of a massive landfill from which we could view the region’s toxic brownfields, waste disposal sites, and industrial wetlands, and the blinking neon interior of one of the casinos now lining the Indiana lakefront. We also hunted down existing visual materials, including countless items at the Southeast Chicago Historical Museum and those in our own family “archive,” such as the buckling 16-millimeter home movies taken by my Great-Granduncle Gust in the 1930s and 1940s.

The heavily edited *Exit Zero* film is reflexive and has an exploratory feel as it weaves together the same multigenerational family stories found in the book. However, the visual and aural dimensions of the film opened up possibilities for conveying lived experiences of social class in richer ways than could have been done by text alone, more fully engaging the senses and underscoring different ways of apprehending and conveying that world (Pink 2009). Video offered enhanced possibilities not only to explore Southeast Chicago as a landscape but also to provide a sense of class “habitus,” of the profound import of a look, a hand gesture, a way of speaking, or of the centrality of material artifacts to our daily experiences. For example, through an audiotaped interview incorporated into the film, I became reacquainted with my deceased grandfather’s



“hillbilly” accent, as he recounts being present at the Memorial Day Massacre. And, through Chris’s filmed images of my mother’s carefully preserved antique dining room with its porcelain teacups and family heirlooms, I came to appreciate the symbolic dimensions of this gendered home space that had so long served as a buttress against a chaotic post-mill-shutdown world.

In working with visual materials, however, we continued to emphasize stories, the dialogic, and the situated nature of our knowledge. Whereas the *Writing Culture* volume had been leery of the power-laden dynamics of the visual and “the ethnographic gaze,” Haraway (1988) had a less negative view of the visual, arguing that the problem with vision is not the power relations inherent in it but the need to recognize that vision is always “coming from somewhere.” The *Exit Zero* film seeks to underscore the “situatedness” of vision that Haraway alludes to while also emphasizing the “dialogic” nature of the images we use. It does so by suggesting a kind of polyphony that goes beyond texts and extends across a range of materials—whether moving or still images, recordings, or written documents—that are recognized to be shot through with stories. There are the “stories” of those who took the images and of why and what they were capturing. And there are also the narratives such images convey, any counternarratives they might offer, how they come to be “refracted” through particular visual genres or social discourses, and the import of what is selectively emphasized or ignored (Ishizuka and Zimmerman 2008, Strassler 2010:23). For example, my great-granduncle’s silent 16-millimeter home movies from the 1930s and 1940s—in which we see a woman in a hairnet smiling at the camera and a man playing the accordion enjoying a weekend tugboat excursion on the industrial Calumet River—constitute partially opaque acts of

storytelling about family, upward mobility, working-class sociality (and more we may not recognize) that were created in conversation with known and unknown interlocutors as well as the self.

Ethnographic filmmakers have, of course, offered their own analyses of the politics of representation and relationships with research subjects. In some cases, these critiques preceded those of the *Writing Culture* school, most powerfully evident in the “shared anthropology” of Jean Rouch, who viewed his filmmaking as a kind of conversation with participants (Feld 2003:18–19; Rouch 2003:43-44). Rouch incorporated feedback from participants in the making of his ethnographic films, and he worked with West African collaborators beginning in the late 1950s to create a series of “ethnofiction” films based on improvisation and the joint creation of storylines. He pioneered uses of reflexivity and critiqued anthropological practice and representation, including a hilarious scene in *Petit a Petit* (Rouch 1970), a film in which his West African “co-conspirators,” led by Damoure Zika, measure white Parisian heads with calipers, satirizing relationships between anthropologists and subjects. He also emphasized the importance of dreams, interior states, and complex forms of subjectivity (in contrast to the more external orientation of many observational documentaries).

Our own attempts to address the politics of representation in the documentary *Exit Zero: An Industrial Family Story* emerged in parallel with—rather than as distinct from—those of the *Exit Zero* book. Our goal has not been to elide our own authorial authority, as some *Writing Culture* proponents might have suggested, or to make collaborative films, as Rouch did, but to “situate” this creative work through an autoethnographic voice that is recognized to be in conversation with others. Rather than downplaying editing in favor

of the observational style historically valorized in most ethnographic filmmaking (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009; McDougall 1998), we instead sought to valorize the layering and pastiche effects of editing. Doing so has underscored both our own reflexive journey to understand the impacts of deindustrialization and the dialogism implicit in producing images and stories that involve working with images and stories produced by others.

This approach contrasts with some recent trends in sensory ethnographic filmmaking that conceive of multisensory work in contrast to narrative or the spoken or written word (an academic rebellion against academia's own word-centric logic).<sup>15</sup> The *Exit Zero Project* instead emphasizes how everyday storytelling gains power as it travels across sensory modalities. It does so in ways that more fully accord with the experiences of daily life in Southeast Chicago, where “storytelling” crosses oral accounts, home movies, photographs, and material artifacts. The project also recognizes that one sensory mode often bleeds into another. The cover of my great-grandfather's memoir, on which he wrote “The Struggle for Existence from the Cradle to the Grave” in an unsteady hand, is as much a visual artifact as a textual one (see Figure 2). And the sociality of images comes not only from the “stories” they tell, or those surrounding their creation, but, as Elizabeth Edward's (2006) work suggests, also from how images as material objects circulate and link people and spaces, like the industrial photographs “rescued” from the trash by steel-mill employees and brought to the Southeast Chicago Historical Museum for safekeeping. By weaving stories—and the dialogue implicit in that storytelling—across senses and media, our goal is not to pit the linguistic against other modes of apprehension but, instead, to explore how they are interwoven in the fabric of our lives.

Like other anthropologists, we are interested in whether engaging with multiple sensory modalities can offer a richer sense of lived realities in our ethnographies (Pink 2009).

[h2]“Witnessing” as a response

Just as the *Exit Zero* book and film were produced in tandem, responses to them in Southeast Chicago are equally intertwined. At the core of these responses, as I argue below, has been a need to “witness.” Academics have commonly understood witnessing as the narration of suffering in ways that open up possibilities for transformation both by recovering past experience and by creating a community that can listen and respond (Torchin 2012:5).<sup>16</sup> Here, I use the term *witnessing* to signify an emotional need on the part of some Southeast Chicago residents (including myself) to acknowledge past trauma and loss associated with economic transformation and deindustrialization that has often been discounted or downplayed in relation to the broader society.

In 2013, the *Exit Zero* book was published by the University of Chicago Press, which is located in Hyde Park, just a few miles from Southeast Chicago, yet in a social world apart. Although I had written the book in a way that I hoped would extend an invitation to at least some Southeast Chicago residents, I had no idea whether many would actually want to read it. After all, it was still an academic book, ultimately geared toward use in university classrooms. The fact that the book initially began to circulate more vigorously in Southeast Chicago than in the academic world was a happy surprise. The reasons were bound up with the access afforded by the project’s transmedia approach as well as by support of old-fashioned social networks. Just before the book came out, Chris Boebel and I launched a preliminary informational website (<http://www.exitzeroproject.org>). The website outlined the transmedia nature of the

project—the book, the in-progress documentary film, and the proposed website collaboration—and included a link to an eight-minute trailer for the film. Southeast Chicago residents came to know about the project largely because our collaborators at the locally respected Southeast Chicago Historical Museum plugged the project, posting the link to our website on its popular Facebook page and alerting members who were not online (in an area with uneven internet usage) through printed newsletters.

Almost immediately, we began receiving a small but steady stream of e-mails and letters from Southeast Chicago residents and former residents. The day the book came out, my startled mother called to tell me that she had seen a copy of it in the storefront window of the beauty parlor that she had long patronized. It quickly became clear that utilizing multiple media was helping expand access to the project by allowing residents to engage with it through diverse means. For example, one young woman attending a local college who had read the book described showing the video trailer to her father, a former steelworker of my dad's generation who, like my father, would have shied away from an academic account. In the months after the book came out, we also held two rough-cut screenings of the *Exit Zero* documentary in Chicago. One screening was held at the Field Museum, with complimentary buses transporting audience members from the Southeast Side;<sup>17</sup> another was a standing-room-only gathering at a local library, for which my mother and her friends insisted on baking cookies and organizing coffee, just as they had at the church and community meetings I attended growing up. (Despite the growing Mexican American population in the region, the audience was primarily made up of white residents and former residents with long-standing ties to the region.)<sup>18</sup>

What is striking about the response in Southeast Chicago so far—and which we had not fully anticipated—was how deeply stories breed more stories. At rough-cut screenings, audience members used the occasion to “witness” their own experiences, getting up and, sometimes tearfully, telling their own stories of how the loss of the mills affected them, their families, or their community.<sup>19</sup> One older man, a former labor leader, said after the Field Museum screening, “I was born and raised [on the Southeast Side of the city]: five generations of steelworkers from Poland all the way down to my son . . . . And what they did in that community is terrible.” A woman who, like her father, had worked at US Steel South Works, commented, “I also remember seeing guys I worked with who had such pride because the mills were so ingrained in a sense of who you were, that you could support your family. And I remember when those plants closed and some of those guys were picking up cans in the alley and it still makes me cry to this day because they were such good people.”

A middle-aged man who graduated from high school in 1979 and was part of the last generation to enter the mills, spoke at length:

I lived here [in Southeast Chicago] my whole life. The day after I graduated, I—we all—went into the mill . . . . My grandfathers, my uncle, my dad, they all worked at the mill . . . That was like a birthright of being born here. You were gonna have a mill job, a steel-mill job, a shipyard job. And it was all gone. In five years it was gone. And they left us here with nothing.

Later, he added,

I think the point you’re trying to make is how it affected your father’s life, how he died a slow death. And a lot of fathers did. But your father, he died twice just like

my dad did. You work your whole life. You're promised that [your pension and benefits]. These jackasses, they ran away with your pension, your health care. Now, whether you outlive your wife or she outlives you, you live like hell the rest of your life! You have nothing to pass on to your kids!

As these quotes suggest, the witnessing was often deeply emotional, and many people described reading the book or watching the trailer or rough cut as painful or provoking tears (although one woman described it as a “good kind of pain”). Emotion seemed to come from accessing a hurt that had been lived but not often discussed. A woman who saw the online trailer e-mailed me, “I cried when I watched the trailer. I grew up in the 80s also, and watching it was like stepping back in time, it was so real, and I remember when all of this was happening.” In some cases, the emotion appeared to arise from a context in which those from working-class backgrounds fail to see themselves, their relatives, or their experiences of deindustrialization mirrored in popular culture in ways that resonate, if they are even mentioned at all. As one scholar, whose father was a steelworker and who brought his students to the Field Museum screening that he helped organize, wrote, “Part of the emotion among the working class students (and my wife and I, for that matter) was just the honest representation of people who are not often represented at all—the thrill of recognition of ‘people like ours.’” One resident later told me that the book made her feel “like I exist.”

The focus on family (as one man commented, “That’s something you learned on the East Side: you learn families come first”) gave residents and former residents a way to relate to the narrative on the basis of their own experiences and in terms meaningful to them. An older male former steelworker said, “The most touching thing in the world is

we can all relate to it [the family stories in the film.] That’s not saying a hell of a lot for our society, but it says a hell of a lot as working stiff.” One woman, another former steelworker, thanked my family for allowing their stories to be shared and said those stories were what “makes it [the film] real.” She went on to offer a broader critique of representations of working-class people and the region: “One thing: we rarely hear from working-class people in their own words. And I’ve [read] a lot of things written about South Chicago and my experiences. And most of them have annoyed the hell out of me because—they’ve been written by honest people who really want to tell the story—but they didn’t come out right to me.”

In other cases, the witnessing was more private and linked to experiences of illnesses that many suspect were caused by environmental pollution in Southeast Chicago (topics explored in both book and film). One man said publicly in response to the film’s revelation of my having had cancer as a young adult (I later learned he himself had cancer), “It’s something that, when they sold you a house here, they never put it in the mortgage agreement. They never said, ‘Oh and by the way, for the honor of living here, you’re gonna be exposed and most likely die of some rare form of cancer or be an invalid for the rest of your life.’” The implications of deindustrialization for the next generation were also important for Southeast Chicago residents. Some linked the importance of documenting this history with the need to share it with the next generation and, presumably, in this way, move to heal some of the ruptures associated with deindustrialization. At the Field Museum screening, a former steelworker recounted,

[ex]I’m a grandmother now, my children, they grew up in South Chicago and so on. Deindustrialization—I don’t agree with the whole way we think about it. We



still have a working class in this country. It still produces the things people need to live and eat. And we should go see those children, if they're computer programmers or, you know, they're working at McDonalds, they're contributing to the products that we make. So we have a different working class now. We produce the same amount of steel that we did when I worked there with less workers. Where are those other people? They're doing other things.

Others emotionally spoke of the future awaiting those in the next generation and of the obstacles they faced. Such concerns resonate with those addressed by scholars Jennifer Silva (2013) and Sherry Lee Linkon (2013), who have examined, in sociological terms and in contemporary novels, respectively, the plight of working-class youth in a postindustrial context in which local industrial histories are often unknown and experiences of class have become highly individualized.

Critiques were also voiced, again in ways not fully anticipated. Some illuminated class tensions among those historically linked to Southeast Chicago. Despite the overwhelmingly working-class nature of Southeast Chicago proper (higher-level managers and owners rarely lived in the area), differences emerged between members of former steelworking families and those former residents who had worked in low- or midlevel industrial management and had moved to suburbs or relocated elsewhere or who otherwise saw themselves as upwardly mobile. Tensions appeared, for example, between those who blamed corporations and those who blamed unions for deindustrialization. At one screening, another debate arose among current Southeast Chicago residents over issues of pride. One line in the film's narration referred to my own desire as a teenager to "escape from Southeast Chicago." In editing, we had excised the second part of the

original line—“because of the clouds of depression hanging over the area” (due to deindustrialization)—as being self-evident in the context of the film. Watching the film with an audience of family and neighbors, however, I worried that the line would be misconstrued (we subsequently changed it). Some did voice objections. However, it was noteworthy that those who did were not, as I later learned, former steelworkers or their immediate family members but a handful of individuals who held white-collar jobs. While former steelworkers and their family members strongly emphasized the trauma of deindustrialization, those more removed from such experiences, at times, appeared to downplay the critique of what had happened in favor of depicting Southeast Chicago as a worthy place to live or grow up.

Occasionally, audience members expressed a desire that we lighten the tone of the film by also capturing more of the pleasure some experienced growing up in Southeast Chicago “back in the day.” For example, some wished for greater highlighting of the area’s dense social networks or events like Labor Day parades—aspects of community life that many residents highly valued. The older sister of some of my childhood friends theorized about generational differences, emphasizing the “fun” that her generation had had coming of age, before the mills closed, in contrast to the experience of younger generations, like her brothers, who saw the region as a place from which to escape. Some thought the analysis was too painful: One of my mom’s friends commented that the book was “so sad” (i.e., too sad), while one of my sisters suggested that it was hard for her to read the book or watch the film, since she had had to live those difficult experiences and did not want to be reminded of them.

Strikingly, some of the strongest emotional responses to both the book and the film’s rough cut came from what are now referred to as “first generation” college students and academics, both within Southeast Chicago and in other places where this work has been presented. An academic colleague, who grew up in Southeast Chicago and later became a labor historian, publicly commented that reading *Exit Zero* was “painful” to her, “as our paths are in many ways similar.” She wrote, “I find myself cut off, by family members’ death and social mobility, from the sidewalks—really the familial space—[of Southeast Chicago] [that] I vowed to inscribe in my mind. For years I’d return, seeking the industrial sublime and the grit I felt it my luck to inhabit. But then it felt no longer mine.” Later, she added, “Education took me some distance from my working class roots. The social and educational struggles I met at college took years to break the kinks out of . . . I too found it hard to find words to speak or write my truth, or any truth . . . I came to feel an outsider in both worlds.”<sup>20</sup> When I have presented the work on college campuses, “first generation” students have often engaged strongly with this aspect of the project. In contrast to the older industrial landscape that I inhabited, most in this younger generation came of age in an era in which expanding inequalities were already well entrenched, and they had family members, often immigrant parents, who worked in service jobs or other low-wage sectors. However, many of their concerns were similar to mine and those of many other scholars from working-class backgrounds: the sense of inhabiting two distinct “worlds”; difficulties negotiating relationships with family members as their educational paths took them in different directions; a sense of guilt for being at sometimes-elite institutions while families were hurting; and difficulties knowing how to articulate and understand what they were feeling.

Although film and book cover similar terrain, the responses to them have differed in ways we are still untangling. A few people suggested that the book was more “intimate,” in that it better conveyed the internal complexities of my own feelings or interpretations; others suggested the reverse and emphasized the enhanced emotional experience of watching characters like my father in the film. As one student said, “In the book, you were telling me what happened when the steel mills closed. In the film, I felt like I was experiencing it myself,” suggesting a commonly voiced—if potentially deceptive—experience of the immediacy and transparency of moving images. In general, the responses to the book and documentary rough cut—and the emotional intensity of Southeast Chicago residents’ need to “witness” and revisit their own experiences—not only affected how we edited the film but also shaped how Chris and I conceptualized the project as we moved forward. In the end, it also transformed the nature of our own involvement with the final component of the Exit Zero Project—the in-progress website.

### Documenting, archiving, and sharing

#### *The website*

Responses to the *Exit Zero* book and documentary have made clear the desire of many Southeast Chicago residents and former residents to document a history they perceive as being lost or deliberately erased. I found it striking that some individuals began e-mailing me photographs or other documentation of family members who had worked in the steel mills. Among them was Patty Werber, whose father, like mine, had worked at Wisconsin Steel. She e-mailed me photos with the comment, “Watching your Dad [in the documentary trailer], made me think of my Dad, and I just wanted to share with you.” In

addition to a rare informal image of her dad and coworkers on the job, she also shared her father's mill identification card, using this document to underscore and validate the lived experience of a loved one. Such reactions made me realize that my own obsession with documenting my family and Southeast Chicago was not merely an odd personal tic but a common response to the widespread sense of dislocation felt by people in this region.<sup>21</sup>

This desire to document—a shared epistemic project, in Marcus's terms—is also at the heart of the Southeast Chicago Historical Museum, the institution we are collaborating with in developing the interactive website. Although I like to think of the museum as the “attic” of the old steel-mill neighborhoods, there are decades of organizational work beneath the clutter. The museum is a single overstuffed room in a park field house along the Lake Michigan waterfront. Located in an old steel-mill neighborhood once primarily populated by eastern Europeans and now largely by Mexican Americans, it is open only one afternoon a week. It emerged in the 1980s as the mills were disappearing and is run entirely by volunteers. It is the product of grassroots activity and has fed off the apparent need of many in the area to document a collectively experienced history that (along with the region's future) appeared to be slipping away. Community residents—including former steel-mill employees and their family members—have long been the museum's primary patrons (and volunteers). The museum also has a strong community presence beyond the field house. Its director, a former high school teacher raised in the area, regularly presents slide shows of historical photographs in libraries and church basements, sponsoring talks that quickly become collective acts of community remembering. Its 2,100-member Facebook group is also popular with both current and former residents, allowing a window onto the region's diaspora.

The museum holds a wealth of materials, including donated home movies that employees took of the steel mills as they were being demolished; more than a hundred videotaped oral histories; nearly 10,000 photographs; countless documents; and artifacts ranging from eastern European religious icons to the last steel bar produced at US Steel South Works. Much of the material explores everyday life in this former industrial community and is associated, for instance, with churches, ethnic organizations, Labor Day events, schools, and sports teams. The stories of how items ended up in the museum are often as interesting as the items themselves. As mentioned above, some employees rescued company-owned images of the steel mills from the trash and brought them to the museum for safekeeping at a time when the mills were physically disappearing. Given that the museum is rarely open and is so overcrowded that it is difficult to move around inside, it functions more as an archive than a museum. However, its origin and functions are very different from the state and colonial archives that most anthropologists have explored (see Zeitlyn 2012). (Although its elisions underscore its own set of power relationships, evident, for instance, in the dearth of materials on African American steelworkers.)

The website project weaves together the disciplinary orientations of history and cultural anthropology, seeking to document and understand the region's neglected past while also making sense of how and why people imagine the past the way they do: Why, for example, do they find this history important? Why do they choose to ask about or tell particular stories or document certain things rather than others? And what does this history look like from different points of view within Southeast Chicago? The website, intended as both an online archive and a curated storytelling site, links the museum–

archive as a bricks and mortar institution with the explosive expansion of digital archives and online documentary work. While the entire website is a collaborative venture, the archive portion will appear under the name of the Southeast Chicago Historical Museum, providing it a semiautonomous identity, while the storytelling end will share the name of the Exit Zero Project, allowing for a division of labor and emphasis within the collaboration.

Our partners at the Southeast Chicago Historical Museum have their own goals for the website and for an institution they have kept alive over decades with donated labor: They want to ensure greater access to the collection and its continued life even as those with personal ties to the steel-mill era dwindle in number. Chris Boebel and I share those goals, and we are also intrigued by the creative possibilities of a new form of documentary practice. While a growing number of anthropologists have been researching digital media or creating it for a variety of ends,<sup>22</sup> our own interest is in a new genre of online work that builds on older film-based documentary traditions while experimenting with online possibilities for both linear and nonlinear storytelling and forms of interactivity. (Although we are also envisioning low-tech alternatives, if additional funding proves challenging). This new interactive documentary genre is being forged at places like MIT's Open Doc Lab (ODL),<sup>23</sup> a working group that inspired our idea of creating a documentary website in collaboration with the museum.

The website offers possibilities to move beyond the limitations of the *Exit Zero* book's and film's autoethnographic focus on a single family by using the museum's wealth of material to foreground stories of the "particular" from the full range of families, ethnic and racial groups, and neighborhoods within Southeast Chicago. We also hope to

“scale up” through the particular by linking the Museum/Exit Zero website project with community-based public history projects in other deindustrialized regions in North America, ranging from New England’s textile mills towns to Pennsylvania’s Monongahela Valley to Detroit, Youngstown, Baltimore, and also parts of Canada, fostering analysis through the juxtapositioning of differences and similarities in experiences.

*The politics of nostalgia*

In working on this project, it has become clear that the desire to document these old industrial neighborhoods—a goal central to both the museum and the website project—is not immediately comprehensible to everyone. As we have talked about or presented pieces of this project on college and university campuses, some members of our audiences have seemed puzzled. For students who came of age when dominant viewpoints held that mills were simply ancient, polluting relics, the fact that many Southeast Chicago residents experience such strong emotions and such a sense of loss with deindustrialization can be perplexing. The Exit Zero Project itself does not shy away from the fact that the steel mills were dangerous, dirty, and unhealthy, not only for those who worked in them but also for those who lived in surrounding neighborhoods. Yet, given our documentation of residents’ palpable sense of loss, we have occasionally been asked whether the project (and presumably the museum’s work) is “nostalgic.” Concerns about nostalgia have also appeared among academics. For example, labor studies scholars Jeff Cowie and Joseph Heathcott (2003) have worried about a certain industrial nostalgia in academic work and issued an influential call to scholars to get past the “body count” approach to deindustrialization.



As an anthropologist, I am interested in what we mean by “nostalgia” and what such characterizations of emotion entail and whose point of view they represent. As Kathleen Stewart notes, nostalgia “is a cultural practice not a given content; its forms, meanings and effects shift with the context—it depends on where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present” (1988:227). I would suggest that an exploration of the politics of industrial nostalgia and who is engaging in it tells us something important about the changing class landscape and growing inequalities of our era. It reminds us that in thinking about discursive authority we can’t limit our attention to anthropological representational strategies but need to consider how our own accounts intersect with broader, more hegemonic societal narratives.

Stephen High (2003) makes the crucial point that deindustrialization in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s was often understood in evolutionary (and, I would add, modernist) discursive terms, in which industry was portrayed as an outmoded, obsolete economic orientation, a type of depiction that differed significantly, High argued, from that in Canada during the same decades. Thus, manufacturing was seen as having to make way for a presumably better, “new economy,” a future based on information, knowledge, and high technology. Such portrayals were often bound up with the idea that, although deindustrialization might cause temporary pain in some quarters, such pain was a necessary step in reaching a better future for all. The dominance of this kind of evolutionary narrative underwrote the intensity of deindustrialization in the United States by making it seem not only politically palatable but also like “progress.” It has been the hegemonic nature of such views—especially for those with no direct experience with

older industrial communities—that makes it difficult for some to perceive such transformations as loss rather than as simply a desire to look backward.

Of course, for many Southeast Chicago residents, the profound sense of loss associated with the disappearance of industrial jobs is not because such jobs were industrial (it is, indeed, difficult to romanticize the work) but because the ladder they provided up to middle-class lives and communities and to job stability in the post–World War II era has today largely disappeared. The fact that the “new economy” has had clear winners and losers and that the displaced have not been the ones who have benefited is manifestly evident in Southeast Chicago’s landscape, which is still dominated by empty toxic brownfields and landfills decades after the mills closed. In short, the “nostalgia” experienced by former steelworkers and their families might be read not as irrational longing for an outmoded past but as recognition of social and economic displacement. Given that this displacement is ongoing, it is difficult to get past the “body count.” What appears as industrial “nostalgia” at times harbors critique—sometimes overtly political critique—regarding how working-class lives and communities have changed over time. At times, the critique is clearly stated, as when some residents angrily describe how industrial workers and, by extension, their families were “screwed over” and name those they consider responsible. In other cases, the critique is implicit, often embedded in descriptions of how “sad” it is that such changes “have been allowed to happen.” Ultimately, such statements are commentaries on who and what has been left behind in our contemporary era. As Timothy Choy suggests, “nostalgia can, in the hands of the relatively marginalized, offer a potent critique of the present” (2011:49).

Those in former industrial regions like Southeast Chicago, however, are not the only ones to experience industrial nostalgia. Kate Dudley (1994), in *End of the Line*, considers how, given the evolutionary frames used to understand deindustrialization, industrial workers are sometimes perceived as a new kind of “primitive,” who, like the “tribal peoples” of the colonial era, are assumed to be on the verge of disappearance or at least irrelevance given the creative destruction of an advancing capitalist juggernaut. Interestingly, this problematic portrayal of industrial workers echoes the portrayal of colonial Others criticized by the *Writing Culture* theorists. Such tendencies help to explain why some middle-class observers in the U.S. also engage in a kind of industrial nostalgia distinct from that expressed by Southeast Chicago residents. In this version of nostalgia, industry is viewed through a romantic lens bound up with presumptions about a disappearing industrial working class and exemplified by aestheticized “coffee table” images of industrial ruins (sometimes known as “ruin porn”) or by middle-class urban explorers who seek adventure amidst industrial ruins. This alternative kind of nostalgia has provoked debate among scholars of deindustrialization and working-class studies (with some arguing that it is patronizing in its distance from working-class experiences, while others suggest that it may be bound up with more complex cross-class subjectivities or political positionings [Sherry Lee Linkon, personal communication, February 10, 2014; Strangleman 2013]). Nevertheless, this type of nostalgia is distinct from the kind Choy sees among the marginalized, which serves as a “rebuttal to allochronism” and as a call for “co-evalness” (2011:49). In other words, within places like Southeast Chicago, such nostalgia challenges the idea that industrial workers and

their families are merely vestiges of an industrial past rather than members of a contemporary order with their own (often ignored) claims on the body politic.

There are also other related kinds of industrial nostalgia at work on a broader national terrain. When I began actively working on this project for my master's thesis in the early 1990s and, later, for the book and film in the early 2000s, deindustrialization was considered a passé topic. In more recent years, however, I have been told that it is once again “timely” in light of the economic dislocations stemming from the financial meltdown of 2008. In a context of growing public recognition of the evisceration of the “middle class” and the scale of inequality that has opened up in the United States, industrial nostalgia now sometimes appears as part of a broader desire to take stock of where the United States has headed in recent decades and with what consequences. In such instances, industrial nostalgia may be part of an inchoate, national political regret, a potent symbol of growing inequality and middle-class job loss (hence, Detroit's symbolic power for some).

In short, my aim in examining “nostalgia” is to explore the class-based longings and the visions of the future it encapsulates in a context of rapidly expanding inequality. The website collaboration with the Southeast Chicago Historical Museum offers a space to explore the past from a situated perspective capable of generating counternarratives to these kinds of more-hegemonic evolutionary accounts. It also makes clear why revisiting deindustrialization cannot simply be dismissed as nostalgia but is in fact necessary for understanding the expansion of inequality in the United States, how we got here, and how we might move forward. In other words, the “nostalgia” of the museum and the kinds of

documentary practices to be highlighted on the website suggest important research questions for academics.

### Conclusion

What can transmedia forms offer anthropologists interested in experimental ethnography?

Such forms clearly build on long-standing efforts to enrich ethnography by offering variations on anthropological understanding through multiple modes of sensory apprehension (Pink 2009). However, I would argue, they can do more. Transmedia work offers one solution to tensions at the heart of the “Writing Culture” debates. Must the evocation of an authoritative authorial voice, we might ask, always be complicit with broader social hierarchies, or can we, as scholars, simultaneously accept responsibility for authorship *and* adequately recognize the voices and alternative projects of those with whom we work? While the “Writing Culture” theorists emphasized textual multivocality, critics have worried that effacing recognition of our own authorship might mean failing to take responsibility for those representations, potentially co-opting the projects of others, or creating texts that are so nonnarrative in style that they raise barriers to access.

Transmedia forms offer promising possibilities, though not because online technologies are inherently democratizing, as some might have it. Indeed, as suggested in the volume *Media Worlds* (Ginsburg et al. 2002:23), media technologies inevitably provide both hegemonic and counterhegemonic possibilities. Rather, the promises stem from the fact that transmedia approaches allow a single project to appear in multiple genres, styles, forms, and authorial voices. While the *Exit Zero* book and film are unapologetically authored (albeit eschewing “voice of god” narration and heavy authorial authority for

situated reflexive voices that acknowledge the writer and filmmakers as only one set of cultural producers among many), the website project, in contrast, represents a collaborative team-based effort, with interactive, if curated, components. This transmedia project allows different pieces to appeal to different audiences, to emphasize different storylines or types of analysis, to foster different styles of interaction, and to create online and offline dialogue among its various components. In short, it is intended to expand possibilities for multilayered conversation and for engaging multiple audiences.

If the focus of the “Writing Culture”-era debates were on texts and representation, the focus in our current historical moment has been shifting to issues of engagement and access (hopefully, as Marcus suggests, bringing along the critiques learned along the way). While what might be defined as transmedia work has historical precursors within anthropology, the question we must consider is how online work and networked audiences further expand or, as Samuel Collins and Matthew Durnington (2015) put it, “reconfigure” its possibilities. Finally, if ethnographic work is always dialogic—“the art of perfecting conversation” as Sharon Hutchinson (1996:45) suggests—transmedia work has the potential to heighten that reality. However, as this project also makes clear, “engagement” does not happen on its own but along concrete lines of connection and through particular networks, whether in virtual or face-to-face terms. Considering how to nurture such engagement is a crucial step in fostering ethnographic media in the service of a more public anthropology (Checker 2009; Collins and Durnington 2015; Collins et al. 2013; Gubrium and Harper 2013). In the end, although the challenges of doing such work may be daunting, transmedia ethnography raises possibilities for addressing some of the questions that have long plagued critical anthropologists interested in exploring (and

transforming) the web of unequal relationships at the heart of ethnography and for fostering anthropology as a form of critique (Marcus and Fischer 1986) that can take on some of the growing inequalities of our era.

#### Notes

*Acknowledgments.* My deepest gratitude goes to my family, who allowed me to do this work even when it was difficult to do so, and to my husband and collaborator in all things Exit Zero—Chris Boebel. Thanks also to friends and colleagues who commented so astutely on drafts of this article: Heather Paxson, Ann Marie Leshkovich, Smita Lahiri, Janet McIntosh, Elizabeth Ferry, Graham Jones, Seth Hannah, Ben Wurgraft, Jean Jackson, and, particularly, Stefan Helmreich, who engaged deeply with multiple drafts. Thanks to Angelique Haugeraud for her terrific and generous work as editor and to the anonymous reviewers for *AE*. An NEH Humanities Collections and Reference Resources grant and an MIT SHASS Research Fund Award have provided initial support for the website project, while the LEF Foundation offered support for the film. A special thanks to Faye Ginsburg. Although I was not in the Culture and Media Program while a graduate student at NYU, Faye’s influence was far-reaching. Her attention to the politics of representation and her emphasis, following Jean Rouch, on the relationships at the heart of media making have had a profound influence.

1. The term *transmedia* exists within an ecology of terms like *multimedia*, *cross-platform storytelling*, and *intermediality*. Jenkins (2003) discusses its use primarily in relation to fictional entertainment. Others, like the Tribeca Film Institute, have used it to refer to documentary work. Its use has not been without controversy, particularly among scholars interested in “medium specificity.” For an overview of related debates, see Kinder and

McPherson 2014.

2. Well-known anthropologists who have worked across text and film include Barbara Myerhoff and Karl Heider, who published written ethnographies (Heider and Gardner 1972; Myerhoff 1980) and produced ethnographic films (Gardner 1963; Littman 1976) related to their respective *Number Our Days* and *Dead Birds* projects. More-recent anthropologists working in similar fashion include Alan Klima, whose film *Ghost and Numbers* (2009) has an accompanying in-progress book, *The Nextworld*, and Karen Nakamura's (2010, 2013) project on mental illness in Japan.

3. For example, Alison Griffiths (1996, 2001) notes that, although early anthropologists readily incorporated photographs into their work, they were more ambivalent about the use of film, which was associated with popular entertainment. In later years, film seemed less suited to capturing the internal mental states in which anthropologists increasingly became interested.

4. For discussion of playing with boundaries between fiction and anthropology, see Narayan 2012, Behar 1997, and Waterston and Vesperi 2009. On the boundaries between anthropology and art and visual media, see Grimshaw 2001 and Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009, and for discussion of the ethnographic terminalia exhibits at recent American Anthropological Association meetings, see Kirksey and Helmreich 2010.

5. See also Collins and Durning 2015, Collins et al. 2013, and Gubrium and Harper 2013. Although these works do not specifically address the kind of transmedia projects discussed here, they consider anthropological engagement with digital formats and online networks in ways intended to foster more open and participatory research as well as more "public" forms of anthropology. For further discussion of public anthropology, see



Checker 2009 and the influential California Series in Public Anthropology published by the University of California Press.

6. Throughout this article, the term *experimental* references the interest in alternative forms of ethnographic representation and practice that emerged in relation to the “Writing Culture” debates. See also *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus and Fischer 1986).

The term does not refer to formalistic experimentation as understood, for example, within avant-garde filmmaking.

7. While all forms of ethnography raise ethical questions, research involving family raises its own set of issues. I am deeply grateful to my living immediate family—Arlene Walley, Joelyn Walley, and Susan Walley—as well as my extended family for their support and forbearance during the creation of this work. I have tried to be both truthful and sensitive to not overstepping boundaries in terms of what to write or show.

8. For important cautions about the use of personal narratives, see Stacey 1988 and Ewick and Silbey 1995. For other accounts of narrative, influential for this project, see Maynes et al. 2008, Portelli 1991, Cruikshank 1998, and Ochs and Capps 2001.

9. Thanks to Chris Boebel, who first called my attention to these patterns of difficulty in speaking.

10. See Lubrano 2004, Steedman 1986, Rodriguez 1982, and Dews and Law 1995.

11. See also Barbara Jensen’s (2012) discussion of class differences in learned analytical styles, which builds on the work of Shirley Brice Heath.

12. The term dialogic is used throughout this article not only in the more restricted literary sense used by scholars like Mikhail Bakhtin but in the more generic sense that emerged in anthropology post-the Writing Culture debates. In other words, not

only should anthropologists emphasize the multiplicity of voices embedded in texts, but we should emphasize that fieldwork – like social life more broadly - is relational, processual, suffused with prior speech acts and the intentions of others, and created in the give-and-take of everyday interactions and conversations.

13. See Waterston and Vesperi 2009 on how intimate ethnography builds on feminist theorizing and writing.

14. I am indebted to Vince Brown for suggesting this framing.

15. Some of the most dynamic contemporary ethnographic filmmaking and theorizing takes a sensory ethnographic approach. See, for example, MacDougall 1998 and 2005 and the innovative and influential films produced by Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Lisa Barbash, Verena Paravel, and J. P. Sniadecki at Harvard’s Sensory Ethnography Lab.

16. “Witnessing” can connote religious witnessing or bearing witness to political atrocities. Some anthropologists have also conceived of their own role as an ethical form of “witnessing” in the face of hardship (Scheper-Hughes 1995). See Torchin 2012 for discussion of the complexities of witnessing in relation to visual media.

17. We are deeply grateful to Jack Metzgar, Carrie Breitbach, and the Chicago Working Class Studies Consortium for organizing and cosponsoring this event along with Mark Bouman, Madeleine Tudor, and Alaka Wali at the Field Museum.

18. In the future, we plan to engage in outreach specifically to the Mexican American community. Interest in the project is suggested by the sizable number of Mexican American residents of Southeast Chicago who contributed to a Kickstarter campaign to raise money for the *Exit Zero* documentary.

19. Our sincere thanks to Heather Paxson and Stefan Helmreich, who captured the emotionally intense Q&A at the Field Museum event on their iPhones, allowing us to transcribe these kinds of comments.
20. Carol Quirke, discussant comments for panel “The Long Arm of Deindustrialization: A Roundtable on Christine Walley’s Exit Zero”; Working Class Studies Association meeting, Madison, Wisconsin, June 14, 2013.
21. This need to document is also apparent in other recent work by former Southeast Chicago residents. See Stanley n.d. and Kraff 2012. It is also present in other deindustrialized communities, as became clear at the “Deindustrialization and Its Aftermath” conference organized by Stephen High at Concordia University in Montreal in May 2014.
22. A few of many such online projects include Matthew Durlington and Sam Collins’s Anthropology by the Wire (<http://anthropologybythewire.com>); Kim and Mike Fortun’s Asthma Files (<http://www.fortuns.org/>); Michael Welsch’s Mediated Cultures (<http://mediatedcultures.net/>); the Inuvialuit Living History project (<http://inuvialuitlivinghistory.ca>); and the Appalshop Oral History Project (<http://appalshop.org>).
23. The ODL hosts a database of the emerging genre of interactive documentary projects (see <http://docubase.mit.edu>). Of particular interest is the impressive transmedia project of ODL faculty member and American studies scholar Vivek Bald, whose Bengali Harlem project is similar in conception and scope to the Exit Zero Project in that it includes a book (Bald 2013), an in-progress documentary film, and an interactive documentary website (<http://www.bengaliharlem.com>).

*References cited*

Abu-Lughod, Lila

1991 Writing against Culture. *In* Recapturing Anthropology. Richard Fox, ed.

Pp. 137–162. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research.

1993 Writing Women's Worlds. Berkeley: University of California Press.

2007 Return to Half-Ruins: Memory, Postmemory, and Living History in

Palestine. *In* Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory.

Ahmad Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds. Pp. 77–104. New York:

Columbia University Press.

Bald, Vivek

2013 Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Behar, Ruth

1997 The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart.

Boston: Beacon Press.

2007 An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba. New Brunswick, NJ:

Rutgers University Press.

Behar, Ruth, and Deborah Gordon, eds.

1996 Women Writing Culture. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Boebel, Chris, dir.

2015 Exit Zero: An Industrial Family Story. 92 min. Exit Zero Project, LLC.

Cambridge, MA.

Brady, Erika

1999 *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Callaway

1992

Checker, Melissa

2009 Anthropology in the Public Sphere 2008. *American Anthropologist* 111(2):162–169.

Choy, Timothy

2011 *Ecologies of Comparison: An Ethnography of Endangerment in Hong Kong*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Clifford, James

1986 Partial Truths. *In Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. James Clifford, and George Marcus, eds. Pp. 1–26. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Clifford, James, and George Marcus

1986 *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Collins, Samuel Gerald, and Matthew Slover Durlington

2015 *Networked Anthropology: A Primer for Ethnographers*. Abington, UK: Routledge.

- Collins, Samuel, Matthew Durlington, Glenn Daniels, Natalie Demyan, David Rico, Julian Beckles, and Cara Heasley  
2013 Tagging Culture: Building a Public Anthropology through Social Media. *Human Organization* 72(4):358–368.
- Cowie, Jefferson, and Joseph Heathcott, eds.  
2003 *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.
- Cruikshank, Julie  
1998 *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Dews, C. L. Barney, and Carolyn Leste Law, eds.  
1995 *This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Dudley, Kathryn  
1994 *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Post-Industrial America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Edwards, Elizabeth  
2006 Photographs and Sounds of History. *Visual Anthropology Review* 21(1–2):27–46.
- Ewick, Patricia, and Susan S. Silbey  
1995 Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales: Toward a Sociology of Narrative. *Law and Society Review* 29(2):197–226.

Feld, Steve

2003 Introduction. *In Ciné-Ethnography*. Jean Rouch; Steve Feld, ed. and trans). Pp. 1–25. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Fortun, Kim

2010 Foreword. *In Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. James Clifford and George E. Marcus. Pp. vii–xxii Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fox, Richard, ed.

1991 *Recapturing Anthropology*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research.

Gardner, Robert, dir.

1963 *Dead Birds*. 85 min. Andover, MA. Peabody Museum.

Ginsburg, Faye, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin

2002 Introduction. *In Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*. Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, eds. Pp. 1–36. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Griffiths, Alison

1996 Knowledge and Visuality in Turn of the Century Anthropology: The Early Ethnographic Cinema of Alfred Court Haddon and Walter Baldwin Spencer. *Visual Anthropology Review* 12(2):18–43.

2001 *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn of the Century Visual Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Grimshaw, Anna

2001 *The Ethnographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing in Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grimshaw, Anna, and Amanda Ravetz

2009 *Observational Cinema: Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Gubrium, Aline, and Krista Harper

2013 *Participatory Visual and Digital Methods*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Haraway, Donna

1988 *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*. *Feminist Studies* 14(3):575–599.

Heider, Karl G., and Robert Gardner

1972 *The Dani of West Irian: An Ethnographic Companion to the Film "Dead Birds."* Andover, MA: Warner Modular Publications.

High, Stephen

2003 *Industrial Sunset: The Making of the North America's Rust Belt, 1969–1984*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Hochman, Brian

2014 *Savage Representations*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hutchinson, Sharon

1996 *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State*. Berkeley: University of California Press.



Ishizuka, Karen, and Patricia Zimmerman

2008 *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*.

Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jenkins, Henry

2003 Transmedia Storytelling. MIT Technology Review, January 15.

<http://www.technologyreview.com/news/401760/transmedia-storytelling/>, accessed October 16, 2013.

Jensen, Barbara

2012 *Reading Class: On Culture and Classism in America*. Ithaca, NY:

Cornell University Press.

Kinder, Marsha, and Tara MacPherson

2014 *Transmedia Frictions: The Digital, the Arts, and the Humanities*.

Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kirksey, Eben, and Stefan Helmreich

2010 The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography. *Cultural Anthropology*

25(4):545–576.

Klima, Alan, dir.

2009 *Ghosts and Numbers*. 67 min. Documentary Educational Resources.

Watertown, MA.

Kraff, Georgia Nejak

2012 *Fireflies in a Jar: A Milltown Reverie*. N.p.: Kaliad.

Linkon, Sherry Lee

2013 Narrating Past and Future: Deindustrialized Landscapes as Resources.

International Labor and Working Class History 84:38–54.

2014 Book Review: Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago.

Working Class Studies Association Newsletter.

<http://www.wcstudies.org/newsletter/spring-2013/book-reviews/book-reviews/>, accessed August 23, 2014.

Littman, Lynne, dir.

1976 Number Our Days. 28 min. Los Angeles. Community Television of Southern California.

Lubrano, Alfred

2004 Limbo: Blue Collar Roots, White Collar Dreams. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons.

MacDougall, David

1998 Transcultural Cinema. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

2005 The Corporeal Experience: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Marcus, George

2007 Two Decades after Writing Culture: From the Experimental to the Baroque. Anthropological Quarterly 80(4):1127–1145.

Marcus, George E., and Michael M. J. Fischer

1986 Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Maynes, Mary Jo, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett

2008 *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Myerhoff, Barbara

1980 *Number Our Days: A Triumph of Continuity and Culture among Jewish Old People in an Urban Ghetto*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Nakamura, Karen

2013 *A Disability of the Soul: An Ethnography of Schizophrenia and Mental Illness in Contemporary Japan*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Nakamura, Karen, dir.

2010 *Bethel: Community and Schizophrenia in Northern Japan*. 40 min. Manic Productions.

Narayan, Kirin

2008 *My Family and Other Saints*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

2012 *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Chekhov*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ochs, Elinor, and Lisa Capp

2001 *Living Narrative: Creating Lives in Everyday Storytelling*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Okeley, Judith, and Helen Callaway

1992 *Anthropology and Autobiography*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Pandian, Anand, and M. P. Mariappan

2014 *Ayya's Accounts: A Ledger of Hope in Modern India*. Bloomington:

Indiana University Press.

Panourgia, Neni

1996 *Fragments of Death: An Athenian Anthropography*. Madison: University

of Wisconsin Press.

Pink, Sarah

2009 *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. London: Sage.

Portelli, Alessandro

1991 *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in*

*Oral History*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Reed-Danahay, Deborah

1997 *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*. Oxford: Berg.

Rodriguez, Richard

1982 *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. New York:

Bantam Dell.

Rouch, Jean

2003 *Ciné-Ethnography*. Steven Feld, ed. and trans. Minneapolis: University

of Minnesota Press.

Rouch, Jean, dir.

1970 *Petit a Petit*. 93 mins. Pierre Braunberger and Films de la Pleiade. Paris.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy

1995 *The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology.*

*Current Anthropology* 36(3):409–440.

Silva, Jennifer

2013 *Coming Up Short: Working Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty.*

Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stacey, Judith

1988 *Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?* *Women's Studies International*

*Forum* 11(1):21–27.

Stanley, Rob

N.d. *Once Upon a Time in South Chicago.* Self-Published.

Steedman, Carolyn

1986 *Landscape for a Good Woman.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University

Press.

Stewart, Kathleen

1998 *Nostalgia—A Polemic.* *Cultural Anthropology* 3(3): 227–241.

Strangleman, Tim

2004 *Work Identity at the End of the Line? Privatisation and Culture*

*Change in the UK Rail Industry.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

2013 “Smokestack Nostalgia,” “Ruin Porn” or Working-Class Obituary: The

Role and Meaning of Deindustrialization Representation.

*International Labor and Working Class History* 84:23–37.

Strassler, Karen

2010 *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Torchin, Leshu

2012 *Creating the Witness: Documenting Genocide on Film, Video, and the Internet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Walley, Christine J.

2013 *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Post-Industrial Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Waterston, Alisse

2014 *My Father's Wars: Migration, Memory and the Violence of a Century*. New York: Routledge.

Waterston, Alisse, and Barbara Rylko-Bauer

2006 *Out of the Shadows of History and Memory: Personal Family Narratives in Ethnographies of Rediscovery*. *American Ethnologist* 33(3):397–412.

Waterston, Alisse, and Maria Vesperi, eds.

2009 *Anthropology Off the Shelf: Anthropologists on Writing*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Zeitlyn, David

2012 *Anthropology In and Of the Archives: Possible Futures and Contingent Pasts*. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41:461–480.

Christine Walley

Department of Anthropology

MIT

Cambridge, MA 02139

[cwalley@mit.edu](mailto:cwalley@mit.edu)

Figure captions

Figure 1. Highway exit ramp for Southeast Chicago's old steel-mill neighborhoods.

(Photo credit: Chris Boebel.)

Figure 2. Cover of the memoir of John Mattson, who immigrated to Chicago in 1910 to work in the area's steel mills. (Walley/Hansen family collection.)