

# **From secrecy to transparency and back again Sharing anthropological data in the age of Open science**

**13-14 September 2022**

Amphithéâtre Max Weber, Université Paris Nanterre

## **International Conference**

Ethical and scientific principles concerning the transparency and accessibility of the field data that informs published ethnographies have varied greatly over time – from an early ideology of transparency associated with salvage ethnography at the beginning of the 20th century, such as in the Yale Human Relations Area Files, to the emergence of ethical concerns over the security and preservation of the privacy of informants after WWII and more recently with the controversial Human Terrain System in the US military, as well as to an increasing awareness of local sensibilities towards the preservation of secret knowledge. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the impetus for increased accountability and transparency in public organisations was immediately followed in Europe by new data restrictions with the adoption of the General Data Protection Regulation in 2018. While the anonymization of research participants, going well beyond a mere pseudonymization process, has long been the rule in anthropology, a parallel drive for naming and identifying the subjects of anthropological enquiry in the wake of the Writing Culture critique (see Crapanzano's *Portrait of Tuhami*, 1983) and Indigenous scholarship is now accepted as a form of empowerment and recognition of shared cultural and intellectual property rights over ethnographic data and knowledge.

In European institutions, the Open science movement has gained momentum in the past decade with the digitization of much of our professional practice. Aiming for an increased accountability, inclusiveness and sharing of the benefits of science with society at large, it translates into a series of policies and recommendations to open scientific data. But what does this “openness” imply for a discipline such as anthropology? Who are social scientists accountable to? With whom lies the responsibility and authority to make the collected materials available, in what form and to whom? The research project we have conducted since 2019 at the Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative, at Nanterre University, “The frontiers of anthropological knowledge”, was specifically designed to question the application of these open access principles to anthropological materials. Through a set of case studies of ethnographic corpuses (sound recordings, photographs, video, fieldnotes) collected at various times in various places, it sought to understand the limits of transparency or of openness that these materials can tolerate without compromising or being counterproductive to the conduct of research.

It is with the idea of pursuing these interrogations and analysing further the implications of the Open data movement on our anthropological practice that we would like to consider limit ethnographic cases that shed light on the conundrums, and the solutions anthropologists have encountered and devised over time to respond to empirical field situations or the additional questions that have to be raised and taken into account before the opening of such material could be envisaged. Thus we would like to invite anthropologists who practice undercover ethnography or ethnography in sensitive, violent, forbidden or illicit contexts, ethnography whose data is confidential or whose data once displayed could harm or distress individuals and collectives, ethnography whose data is too intimate to be shared, or, on the contrary, anthropology whose data needs to be urgently disseminated for political or economic purposes.

Co-convened by Jessica De Largy Healy (CNRS) and Monica Heintz (UPN) as part of the ANR Project *Anthropen. The frontiers of anthropological knowledge* (Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative/ MSH Mondes)

## CONFERENCE PROGRAM

### DAY 1: Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> of September 2022

9h Morning tea & coffee  
9h30 Welcome and Introduction: Jessica De Largy Healy and Monica Heintz

#### Panel 1: Secrets

Chair: Anthony Stavrianakis (CNRS)

10h Isabelle Rivoal (CNRS) – Aporia of trust: between respect for sources and the administration of proof. Managing data in the context of religious secrecy (Druzes, Middle East).  
10h40 Martin Lamotte (CNRS) – Finding a secret, Keeping it secret! Operation of knowledge and acknowledgment within the gang Los Netas  
11h20 Coffee break  
11h35 Sam Williams (MPI Halle) – Too intimate to be shared? Sex, ethics, and ethnographic “data” in an era of open science  
12h15 Discussion  
13h00 Lunch buffet

#### Panel 2: Decolonising ethnographic practices

Chair: Damiana Otoiu (University of Bucharest)

14h00 Haidy Geismar (UCL) – Collecting the World  
14h40 James Rose (University of Melbourne) – Real-time Repatriation: Data Governance for Social Anthropology in the 21st Century  
15h20 Break  
15h35 Theodoros Rakopoulos (University of Oslo) – Decolonising secrets: Of silence, masks, guns, and Cyprus as a Problem  
16h15 Discussion  
17h End of the first day

### DAY 2: Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> of September 2022

#### Panel 3: Authorships?

Chair: Valentina Vapnarsky (CNRS-EPHE)

10h Leandro Varison (mqB) – Contesting anthropological authorship: Indigenous Peoples' critiques of intellectual property rights  
10h40 Aimar Ventsel (U. of Tartu) – Doing the underdog: ethics, trust, friendship  
11h20 Coffee break

11h35 Cyril Touboulie (UPN) – The ethnography of navy special forces: between adequacy and negotiation of research results in the era of open data  
12h15 Discussion  
13h00 Lunch buffet

#### **Panel 4: Revelations**

**Chair: Jessica De Largy Healy**

14h00 Carolina Kobelinsky (CNRS) – Testing the Endurance of the Ethnographic Relationship  
14h40 Elissa Helms (CEU) – Pseudonyms, social media, and the criminalization of solidarity: Research dilemmas in a Bosnian border community along the Balkan Route of migration  
15h20 Break  
15h35 Julie Cayla (CAK) – Ethnologist, spy and apprentice. Secreting the data produced on the African art market in Burkina Faso  
16h15 General discussion  
17h End of the conference

## PAPER ABSTRACTS:

### PANEL 1

**Isabelle Rivoal (LESC-CNRS) – Aporia of trust: between respect for sources and the administration of proof. Managing data in the context of religious secrecy (Druzes, Middle East).**

Forthcoming

**Martin Lamotte (CITERES-CNRS) – Finding a secret, Keeping it secret! Operation of knowledge and acknowledgment within the gang Los Ñetas**

May 2012, I discover that the gang I've been working on for the last 2 years has a secret. Not just any secret and more than one. As our ethnographic relationship begins on a failure and a series of misunderstandings, at the same time that we discuss a common and participatory project on writing their history, the secret appears as a cornerstone and an obstacle to the continuation of our work. It is on the discovery of this secret that the ethnographic relationship will conclude, for a moment. What is left for the anthropologist to say except that he has not succeeded in piercing the mystery and that his fieldwork ends in failure? It is through the analysis, not of the account of this secret but of its existence that the role of this secret in the life of the gang can be elucidated. How does the secret play a role of an operation of knowledge and recognition within the gang? What does the ethnographer's position reveal as a social game around this secret? What does maintaining secrecy say about the ethnographic relationship and the possibility of doing fieldwork? And finally, how, as an anthropologist, is it possible to analyze the secret without being in a regime of revelation?

This paper is based on an ethnography fieldwork begun in 2011 with the Los Ñetas gang, in New York, Barcelona and Guayaquil. During this fieldwork, I initiated a participatory work of co-writing, with some Ñetas, a book on their history. This failed attempt will fuel my reflection on the place of secrecy and the opening of data in Open Data.

**Sam Williams (Max Planck Institute Halle) – Too intimate to be shared? Sex, ethics, and ethnographic “data” in an era of open science**

I want to focus on one phrase (in particular) in the call for papers – the idea of “ethnography whose data is too intimate to be shared”. Part of what’s striking about this choice of words is the conceptual opposition between intimacy and sharing, two ideas that anthropologists (among others) have tended historically rather to run together.

The furore this summer over a PhD student’s open-access article —“sharing” what he learnt “ethnographically” while masturbating over drawings of young boys in Japanese comic books— is but the latest in a series of controversies over disciplinary ethics that have gripped anthropology over recent years. From the affair at HAU to high-profile allegations of professional misconduct, one notable characteristic of these scandals —beyond their strong moral valency and frequent sexual charge— is the role that social media has played.

In this paper, I want to revisit a text I wrote some years ago (indeed, initially presented in the departmental seminar at Nanterre in 2017), and which played a cameo role in the furore this summer when the edited volume it was published in —*Sex: Ethnographic Encounters* (Martin and Haller 2018)— was held up by some as an exemplar of ethnographic work on sex that’s “ethical”.

The chapter drew on fieldwork I’ve been conducting (at intervals) since 2003 in a nightlife scene in Istanbul nearby Gezi Park, historically popular among men who have sex with men. Compared to my early years working there —exploring (among other things) how men seek morally to navigate same-sex sexual encounters— a notable difference during more recent fieldwork has been the increasing role that privately-owned digital platforms like Facebook,

Whatsapp, Grindr, Planet Romeo etc. play in men's interactions (in Turkish "social sharing [*paylaşım*] media"). How are these men learning to pursue sexual intimacy in relationships that are increasingly mediated through digital platforms; particularly in a marketplace that since the Gezi Protests of 2013 has become a national (and international) media focus for a sexually-charged politics of moral order in Turkey? Are there any lessons for an anthropologist to learn vis-à-vis how to navigate the moral stakes of intimacy and sharing in a fractious era of open science?

## **PANEL 2**

### **Haidy Geismar (University College London) – Collecting the world**

Is social media the next ethnographic collection? In this presentation I want to use this question to both excavate some of the complex thinking about the collecting of everyday experiences and digital data, linking discussions that are live within the ethnographic collection (and indeed more broadly in museums) to those live in the world of digital anthropology and critical data studies. This question also moves us beyond the critical interrogation of the role that digital culture plays in museums, to ask an even more vital question about the future of the ethnographic collection. We are an important moment of reckoning with the complex colonial and imperial legacies that continue to structure museum processes of classification and practices of representation. This moment, and those that came before it, is supporting the rise of new forms or political restitution, repatriation, access, and the devolution of curatorial and other authority within collections. But where do we go from here? Is the ethnographic collection trapped in an ongoing moment of critique or can we build on critique and the practice of reparation to create new kinds of collection as well as new museum practices that look to the future as well as to the past? Are the aspirations of ethnographic collecting, forged during the lengthy era of European colonialism – to contain and represent the world – no longer viable within a postcolonial museum practice? And if the ethnographic collection is no longer viable, should we be satisfied with the ways in which corporate social media, and increasingly generic digital platforms, have come to dominate the ways in which we collect the quotidian and everyday experiences of people around the world? I want to argue that the binary – between "retention" (or retain and explain as the current UK government likes to frame it) and "repatriation or return" – currently the zero sum of debates about the ethnographic collection – and its correlate, the binary between private and public property – need to be understood in the context of a more complex range of ownership dynamics and regimes. More than any other artefact social media exposes the fallacy of the public sphere – a form of data that is simultaneously privately and corporately held, which is publicly visible but to which "the public" holds no rights, other than the momentary and temporary experience of visibility. This is less different than we might think to the current regimes of museum ownership that we experience as publics in Europe. We need to ask, not only is there a future for the ethnographic collection, but if there is, what conditions of ownership and what forms of public might it constitute?

### **James Rose (University of Melbourne) – Real-time Repatriation: Data Governance for Social Anthropology in the 21st Century**

Social Anthropologists are currently grappling with complex simultaneous changes in research ethics and data governance regimes across diverse jurisdictions. Internationally, repatriation of unethically acquired ethnographic collections is becoming common-place, resulting in the return of both tangible and intangible cultural assets to their rightful owners. In Europe, the open data movement and the recent implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation appears to challenge social anthropologists' commitment to protect the confidentiality of often-vulnerable research participants. Meanwhile, in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and

elsewhere, the popular refrain 'Indigenous data sovereignty' is compelling many social anthropologists to face discomfiting aspects of their field's involvement in colonial administrative regimes.

In this paper I present a model for how social anthropology might reconcile three interrelated factors contributing to this complex situation: 1) Repatriation of data collected from research participants without clear or sufficiently comprehensive consent; 2) Risks and opportunities presented by legislated instances of the open data movement and; 3) Relevant and operable features of the Indigenous data sovereignty movement. Drawing on my 20-year career as a forensic and expert social anthropologist working with Indigenous community organisations on land rights and cultural heritage preservation cases in the Australian Federal Court and under Northern Territory statutory regimes, I illustrate how this model of social anthropological data governance can be put into effect. 'Real-time repatriation' describes the synthesis of leading ethical, legal and technological standards in proactively upholding and safeguarding the interests and decision-making autonomy of participants in social anthropological research.

### **Theodoros Rakopoulos (University of Oslo) – Decolonising secrets: Of silence, masks, guns, and Cyprus as a Problem**

On Labour Day 1958, a double killing of a woman and a small child took place in a Cypriot village by masked anticolonial guerrillas. Apparently, the woman tried to unmask one leading guerrilla, thus exposing his secretive identity to the colonial forces, and the murder was an overreaction. The violent event took place in the midst of the Greek-Cypriot struggle against the British and the first clashes between Greek- and Turkish-Cypriots while it was part of the low-level civil war between anticolonial nationalist freedom fighters and communist locals with different views on anticolonialism. The masks hiding freedom fighters (and here, alleged assassins) are still celebrated as symbols of transgression and courage by many Greek-Cypriots while they are hated by others.

Revealing this paper's ethnographic story is but the continuation of the attempted revelation of a nationalist guerrilla's true identity by a left-wing woman, who paid the cost with her life. Focusing on family memory of this event for a small refugee community, victims of the ongoing "Cyprus Problem", the paper tackles the delicacies of decolonising theory as part of our disciplinary need to tackle secrecy and transparency as stakes in the societies we study. In line with decolonising arguments, the paper is inspired by the author's personal circumstances (and secrets), and is thus driven by collective self-reflection informed by experiences of previous and current colonisation, and refugeehood. However, the paper also critically calls for attention to the contradictions of anticolonial struggles that bear legacies of post-colonial complexity (and, in Cyprus, the ongoing Problem of division), and stresses the need for constant historicisation and reflection on the persistence and vindication of ideology as well as guilt, and mishap.

### **PANEL 3**

#### **Leandro Varison (musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac) – Contesting anthropological authorship : Indigenous Peoples' critiques of intellectual property rights**

The discussion of publishing, giving access to, or sharing ethnographic data assumes that the anthropologist *owns* these data as he or she would be their creator. As the saying goes, we can only share what we possess, and fieldwork would be a matter of authorship. However, there is nothing natural or universal about this kind of property: the idea that one is the owner of one's creation or invention developed little by little in the North Atlantic countries from the 18th century onwards and, despite the apparent stability that we attribute to it today, the so-called "intellectual property" is constantly being contested, adapted and negotiated.

Drawing on my research in international treaty negotiation forums, I will introduce one such challenge: the quarrel between self-designated Indigenous individuals and communities with intellectual property rights. I will focus on one particular issue contested by Indigenous Peoples: the assumption, that underpins researchers' property over anthropological data, that their "culture" belongs to the public domain. If "cultures" are being conceived and presented by Indigenous Peoples as their property, what are the implications of this trend on the work of anthropologists? Can they share something they don't possess?

**Aimar Ventsel (University of Tartu) – Doing the underdog: ethics, trust, friendship**

In my talk I discuss some issues related to the research on socially and politically marginalized groups. In my research for the book 'Punks And Skins United:

Identity, Class and the Economics of an Eastern German Subculture' I conducted research among others on semi-legal economy of East German working class punks and skinheads. For this study, I relied on my friendship relations in the scene. The research meant overcoming the mistrust these people have to any formal institutions, including the academic ones. I acquired access to their daily lives, participated in illegal work and was offered an insight into the underground political activities. The problem I encountered later was what and how I shall publish of this material. I had to find a solution how to find a way to publish a highly sensitive data about the people who live in a small town where small biographic details can help to identify each participant. What made everything complicated was that the research was conducted in Germany where exist harsh punishments for illegal work. In my talk I will give an overview of ethical and moral problems doing research among people who are one's long time friends in a situation of mutual trust. I also depict how I made a choice of material keeping in mind that the book or academic articles can be read by relevant state officials.

**Cyril Touboulic (Université Paris Nanterre) – The ethnography of navy special forces: between adequacy and negotiation of research results in the era of open data**

How to disseminate ethnographic material from such a discrete and sensitive milieu as the special forces (navy)? Faced with this preliminary question, the major difficulty stems not so much from the institution itself as from the anticipated reception of the results by the civil society. A society today connected to social networks crossed by values that are sometimes the antithesis of those of the marine commandos, where Big Data seems to take on the appearance of a 'superego' (the authority of judgement and censorship, the vector of internalised social, things to do or repair, dictating social conduct, among other things) and makes any anonymisation of data illusory in a system that authorises a detailed description of a person, all at the heart of a population polarised on the veracity of certain information. This polarisation is basically synonymous with a struggle between the two regimes of truth, namely adequacy (discourse corresponding to reality) and negotiation (discourse corresponding to a culture and its harmony).

Based on my fieldwork with the marine commandos, I will show how, as the deadline for the defense - and, consequently, a potential public broadcast - becomes clearer, the desire of the actors oscillates between adequacy (showing the terrain as it is, even in its violence) and negotiation (rounding off the angles, or even removing sensitive elements to the point of drawing up a shifted image). There was a balancing act between, on the one hand, my status as an ethnologist and, on the other hand, that of a civilian, in short. A harmonious dialogue between the scientific vocation and ethics, in short.

Also, I will explain the solutions put in place in partnership with actors who are worried about the idea of a public unveiling or any external consultation of the field notebooks. This concern is understandable when the ethnologist realises that the microcosm he is studying is 'vicious'.

## PANEL 4

### **Carolina Kobelinsky (CNRS-LESC) – Testing the Endurance of the Ethnographic Relationship**

Practising ethnography among border-crossers attempting to get to Europe without the necessary authorisations from the various states implies looking at a world characterised by permanent oscillation between visibility and invisibility, presence and dissimulation, identification and anonymity. This is even more the case when the research focuses on border deaths. How or to what extent can the materials collected be shared when they are likely to be prejudicial to the people who participated in the investigation? How can anthropologists proceed when part of the data assembled in their research is already protected by the privacy rules of the institutions that collect/process it and with which they had to comply in order to be able to conduct fieldwork in the first place?

An initial reflection about the pseudonymization of the (living and dead) subjects at the heart of my current research, who have been struggling to counter anonymity, led me to think about how to preserve confidentiality, protect secret knowledge, and ensure an enduring ethnographic relationship. By extending this reflection and attempting to provide possible answers to the very concrete questions asked above, my aim here is to assess the multiple risks of openness and to consider whether what anthropology would gain in transparency the ethnographer would not lose in legitimacy in the field.

### **Elissa Helms (Central European University) – Pseudonyms, social media, and the criminalization of solidarity: Research dilemmas in a Bosnian border community along the Balkan Route of migration**

Since 2018, thousands of migrants, asylum seekers, and other people moving westward along the Balkan Route have been stuck outside the EU border in the northwest Bosnian region of Bihac, a small town that has been overwhelmed by this influx. Local residents and authorities have in many ways taken things into their own hands, authorities *de facto* criminalizing autonomous aid to migrants and certain residents defying those rules to distribute food, clothing, and other help to those stuck along the Route. This paper addresses some of the dilemmas encountered in my ethnographic research into local responses to this situation. I consider how to grapple with recent critiques of the use of pseudonyms in such a sensitive context. Why does it feel wrong anthropologically to use the real names of ordinary people? Where does this “feeling” come from and how does it clash with current pushes for transparency and data protection all at the same time? Where to draw the line with consent and the quoting of “public” comments in the nebulous spaces of social media groups that play a significant role in shaping local conduct? This paper probes the boundary between public and private speech, asking what kinds of conduct should be considered “fair game” for researchers in such sensitive situation where the vulnerability and marginalization of certain actors is precisely what makes writing about them politically and academically important.

### **Julie Cayla (Centre Alexandre Koyré, CNRS) – Ethnologist, spy and apprentice. Secreting the data produced on the African art market in Burkina Faso**

In Burkina Faso, the "African art" market is marked by a veil of secrecy and the illicit nature of certain practices. Sculptors and *vieillisseurs* are invisibilized because they are able to make copies of freshly made objects look old. Dealers border on illegality when they acquire and trade artefacts with blurred statuses, between fraudulent copy, authentic work of art and patrimonial object.

Through a reflexive return on the place assigned to me by my interlocutors within the market - apprentice for some, spy for others - I will show the ambivalence of the relationship they have



with the intrusion and passion of the ethnologist, and the negotiations necessary to establish an ethnographic relationship based on trust. In the age of open science, disseminating the knowledge produced in this sensitive ethnographic context also requires resolving the paradoxes inherent in such an approach. My presentation will emphasize the heuristic value of taking into account the expectations of the actors vis-à-vis the ethnologist who is then initiated, and the specific knowledge he produces. Based on the solutions chosen to maintain a certain balance between visibility and dissimulation (of people, objects, places and knowledge) as well as their inadequacies, it will be a question of reflecting on the possibilities and limits necessary for the opening up of the data produced in such a context.