

## **CFP: Ethnographic Apps/ Apps as Ethnography (AAA 2015)**

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**Ethnographic Apps/ Apps as Ethnography: Exploring Possibilities for a Locative, Multimedia and Collaborative Future.**

**A Panel Proposal for the American Anthropological Association (AAA) Meetings, November 2015**

**Panel Organizers: Sam Collins (Towson) and Matthew Durlington (Towson)**

We find it curious that anthropologists have paid relatively little attention to apps. Yes, there are certainly apps that help in our ethnographic research, as well as apps that have long been utilized by artists, folklorists, community activists and many others to encourage people to “read” and experience space and place in interesting (and even subversive) ways. But what about apps as part of our research, as, in other words, a form of ethnographic practice? Apps facilitate embodied ideologies, and they mark the exact point of interpellation where structure and symbol meet practice and bodily hexis. Apps show how institutions and other powerful agents are trying to structure the meaning of cities by combining mobile media and social media through organizing embodied narrative experiences. Even when apps reproduce already existing content, they do so by structuring experiences in ways that are illustrative of networked power: the city as a series of connections and disconnections that bring some spaces and meaning together while effectively cutting off vast parts of the city from urban practice. In other words, apps are technologies of inclusion and exclusion, and following their trail can tell us exactly how things like segregation work in an era of the actor network.

Second, these powerful tools are not perfect. In fact, they’re riven with errors—one of the reasons we like Android-based apps is for all of these lumps and bugs. But these are more than simply programmer’s errors—we think of them more like Freudian parapraxes. That is, apps show where there are contradictions, tensions and possibilities for alternative meanings in the interstices of interlocking media platforms. Like the GPS system that can’t keep up with spatio-temporal shifts of neoliberalism, apps can show us fissures where the exercise of power is still incomplete, the space between symbol, structure and practice that allows for the articulation (or at least the evocation) of difference. By definition, geo-locational apps introduce a gap between structure and practice. For scholars like Jason Farman, they are a clarion call for “[creative misuse](#)”. For us, they remind us that utopia lies in the interstices of the urban fabric.

Third, apps allow anthropologists unparalleled opportunities to organize our multimedia, ethnographic data. We’re used to working (and re-working) our notes, transcripts and recordings for written ethnographies, or editing (and re-editing) audio and visual recordings for ethnographic film, but what happens when we’ve got all of the above? Increasingly, anthropologists are leaving the field with a panoply of media: recordings, notes, photos, digital records, etc. Apps suggest one

way of integrating this into ethnographically intended experiences for users. And there are multiple platforms for anthropologists to use in their own research. We've been experimenting with [ARIS](#), an open-source editor for making multimedia apps for the iPhone, but there are other possibilities out there, including [MIT App Inventor](#).

Moreover, forcing ourselves to organize maps, film, photos, archives and interviews into a (semi)coherent user experience is not just a difficult exercise, it's a form of ethnographic analysis. Apps take ethnographers to task for assuming that meaning "inheres" in objects or spaces—with a geo-located app of an urban neighborhood, meaning comes from the ethnographic practice of the user. Can the user interact with your site in a way that is consonant with your own conclusions? And if they don't, isn't that a problem for you to consider? Unlike more traditional forms of disseminations (ethnographic and film), apps offer anthropologists a level of feedback (through user-generated content, app analytics or exit interviews) we usually don't receive until months after our work is published (if at all). This feedback is itself data—where people go, where they don't go, what they saw and what they failed to see. If we dismiss this as ephemeral to our research, we're missing the point: this is where the ethnography (literally) hits the road.

Finally, apps suggest an ethnography that is collaborative, engaging, open and fluid. Working with people to produce multiple media, prototyping apps with our interlocutors, testing apps with students, collecting data from usage, and then re-working what we've done to reflect our new understanding, all under the auspices of an open-source, open-access platform that people can utilize on (more and more) readily available hand-sets.

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