

<http://somatosphere.net/2018/04/new-review-technologies-an-announcement-and-invitation.html>

## New Review Technologies: An Announcement and Invitation

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By Emily Yates-Doerr

This post announces the launch of a book. It is also an invitation.

The book, *The Ethnographic Case: Telling Stories, Shaping Knowledge*, was conceived as a Somatosphere curated series.<sup>[1]</sup> It is now being published by Mattering Press in two iterations. The first you can access [now through this link](#); the second will be available in print in 2019.

The book is an experiment in academic publishing.<sup>[2]</sup> As an open-access press, Mattering Press is committed to making scholarship freely available. The open-access movement out of which Mattering Press emerged has done much to critically rethink strategies for the dissemination and circulation of academic thought.<sup>[3]</sup>

In discussions about the trappings of for-profit academic publication, somewhat less attention has been paid to the unpaid labor structures of peer review upon which the production process depends. Roy Grinkler and (my colleague) Niko Besnier recently issued a call for increased peer review [citizenship](#). There may also be reasons to more radically rework peer review as we know it. Public intellectuals such as [Danya Glabau](#) and [Michael Oman Reagan](#) have noted how peer review's demands of hidden, unaccountable labor can take a particular toll on the tenuously employed, who are often grappling with multiple forms of precarity at once. Though blind peer-review can be a tremendously valuable tool, it also risks upholding the secretive networks of the academy that privilege certain kinds of people and, with them, certain kinds of thought.

This brings us to our experiment and our invitation. With our online book we are testing out an emergent form of *public* peer review. We have adapted an open review template first designed by [Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media & Technology](#), which not only permits but encourages readers to chime in. This, then, is our invitation: we invite you to join our conversation, commenting on the chapters in places where you find yourself inspired to do so. [Instructions and guidelines are here](#). (Please be generous and also keep in mind that these pieces were written as short essays and that the final paperback book will also feature short essays

rather than full-length academic articles.)

The experiment complements a theoretical intervention made by the book. The 29 chapters explore case-making practices of ethnography. The themes and materials of each chapter diverge considerably, but put together they make evident a critical anthropological truth: form is not separable from content. Collectively the book advances the idea that knowledge does not lie ‘out there,’ simply waiting for discovery, but materializes through what is done with it— how it is cared for, how it is made to travel.

Our hope is that commentary adds another dimension to this truth for readers and authors alike. We imagine that readers will share sources, parallel conversations, or ideas and debates with which our authors and our audiences may not be familiar. We anticipate that we will all learn from seeing the sciences of peer review and subsequent editing in action.<sup>[4]</sup> It is our hope that public peer review can be network-building— strengthening relations between scholars who might not otherwise know that they have been shaping each other’s work. Also nice is that reviewers will be able to read, reflect, and respond to one another’s comments.

As an open-ended experiment, there are aspects (many still unimaginable) that may fail. Transparency is not always a good.<sup>[5]</sup> From a reviewer’s standpoint, junior scholars may not be in a sound position to comment on the work of senior scholars. (For this, and other reasons, we have left in place the possibility of making comments anonymous). From the writer’s standpoint, making public the often hastily written peer review comments on work that has sometimes taken the author decades to craft may feel like a violation. It can be embarrassing to read critique, even when this critique is well-conceived and kind; permitting this commentary to be *public* entails a kind of anti-ego that is too-rarely cultivated in intellectual circles. There is also a possibility of trolling and abuse, and as editors, we will unapologetically delete posts that we think undermine respectful discussion.

Aware of these risks, we nonetheless move forward in testing out a new peer reviewing modality. The availability of novel writing technologies alongside a call to rework entrenched power structures of scholarship necessitates that we at least begin to reevaluate some of the foundational practices through which academic knowledge is done.

Editors at Mattering Press have solicited some initial commentaries. Public peer review will run over the next few months (when we close the editing tool we will leave the comments open and visible in the online version of the book). Authors will then have time to rework their contributions. The second version of the book, due early next year, will be an old-fashioned

paperback, for sale at a reasonable price (or downloadable from Mattering Press's growing online collection), that you can underline and dog-ear and put on your own bookCase.

We hope you will participate.

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[1] Somatosphere extends an open call to its readership to curate a series of your own design. Please be in touch with any member of the editorial collaborative to discuss ideas.

[2] As an anthropologist who works in Guatemala, I hesitate to use the term 'experimental' to describe my own endeavors. As Guatemalans know too-well, experiments are often a deeply colonial instrument that aims to render some people as the holders of knowledge and others as less-than-human subjects, to be experimented upon (see [Ceron Valdes 2013](#)). Insofar as I characterize my activities here as experimental, I hope to use 'experiment' in the way it has been used by [Rheinberger](#) or [Fortun](#), connoting the openness of a unfinished system whose outcomes cannot be anticipated in advance. I am not convinced, however, that it's a good term to use and would be open to finding other ways to speak and think about undertaking uncertain events and practices.

[3] Journals such as Cultural Anthropology, Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory, Medicine Anthropology Theory, and Limn have led the way with innovative responses. See, for example, [this piece](#) by Chris Kelty and [this piece](#) by Corsín Jiménez, Willinsky, Boyer, da Col and Golub. Somatosphere, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year, has also been part of the conversation.

[4] See also Rick Wilk's comments [here](#) on the undervalued craft of editing.

[5] For a broader discussion of transparency's limitations in the context of academic publishing, see: Kowal, Emma, Todd Meyers, Eugene Raikhel, Peter Redfield, Sharon Abramowitz, Barbara Andersen, Eileen Moyer, Emily Yates-Doerr and Jenna Grant, 2015. "[The Open Question.](#)" Medicine Anthropology Theory. 2(1): 75-94

**AMA citation**

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