

Emerging Forms of Open Research in Social/Cultural Anthropology

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Abstract: This article explores some current efforts to reconfigure research practices in the field of social/cultural anthropology, in ways that intersect with the open research movement but cannot be reduced to its local implementation. We highlight three initiatives—the Platform for Experimental Collaborative Ethnography (PECE); Experimental Methods for Ethnographic Research, Gathering, and Exchange (EMERGE); and xcol: An Ethnographic Inventory—seeking to make knowledge practices that are presently tacit or invisible in published research outputs more explicit and available for critical reflection. Drawing on edited excerpts from unstructured interviews and a group discussion with participants from the three projects, we find that the primary driver for these efforts is a desire to increase the generativity of research materials, rather than regarding openness as a means to ensure reliability or reproducibility. While directed at different steps of the knowledge production process, all three initiatives invite researchers to engage with some version of “light structure” for documentation, which aims to enable comparison and iteration while respecting fidelity to the source material. These findings offer insight into a distinctively anthropological culture of openness that prioritizes the proliferation of interpretations over the corroboration of fact.

Keywords: anthropology, research infrastructure, collaboration, ethnographic research methods, open research practices

Introduction

To date, the discourse of open research has been neither widely nor evenly embraced across the social sciences and humanities (SSH). Even in contexts where research practices are evolving to reflect greater levels of “openness” within SSH domains, this often entails the elaboration of processes, workflows, and infrastructures that run orthogonal to more hegemonic and universalizing manifestations of open research, such as pre-printing, preregistration, and the open sharing of research data and software code.

In the present contribution to this special issue, we inquire into three initiatives that are working in this orthogonal way to reconfigure an interrelated set of research practices within one SSH discipline: social/cultural anthropology. Each of the three initiatives discussed below addresses a different step in the knowledge production process, imposes its own unique set of formalized practices, and mobilizes a different infrastructural constellation in pursuit of its ends. Although the organizational, cultural, and technical innovations that these initiatives are pursuing have some correspondence with what is happening in other corners of open research, each has its own genealogy of, discursive commitment to, and infrastructural enactment of openness that betrays a neat mapping onto the various strands of the contemporary open research movement.

Social/cultural anthropology is a tradition of empirical inquiry marked by attention to the diversity of human lifeways and a commitment to long-term, immersive fieldwork (Engelke 2018). Like other SSH fields, it approaches issues of openness from the vantage point of the distinctive epistemic, political, and ethical stances it has developed since the crystallization of the field in the early 20th century. For instance, Katharine Herman (2020) has traced threads of infrastructural thinking, formal experimentation, and struggles over governance that informed how advocates within anthropology came to view openness as more than digital access to published works. At times, anthropologists have declared themselves in opposition to aspects of mainstream open research, decrying what some see as the bureaucratization of research data management (e.g., Maeckelbergh 2021; Pels et al. 2018). Others have argued for letting the sensitivity of ethnographic data dissipate before sharing them in unredacted form, with embargo periods lasting as long as a century (Zeitlyn 2021). Meanwhile, anthropologists are already engaged in knowledge practices that serve many of the same functions as canonical open research practices, even as they are not necessarily understood or described in these terms. Examples range from reflexively reporting on how the researcher's assumptions evolved over time, not unlike disclosed departures from a preregistration plan, to the early sharing of results in short-form web publications, which may be argued to serve a function analogous to preprints.

One driver of social/cultural anthropology's engagement with openness has been a renewed interest in collaborative forms of research. Whether a collaboration extends to other variously situated professional researchers, to brokers like local research assistants in the field, or to individuals who are themselves being studied, moving beyond "the 'lone ranger' model of research and writing" (Boyer and Marcus 2020, 3) inherently involves some process of sharing research materials so that selected others can engage with them in a mutually agreeable way. Sharing with collaborators need not mean sharing openly with the whole world, but it does entail recasting purely personal knowledge management practices in the register of the interpersonal. And if,

for many anthropologists, the prospect of sharing their “naked fieldnotes” (Elliott and Wolf-Meyer 2024) with anyone else remains unsettling, then we might still ask: What kind of materials *is* it useful to share, with whom, and at what point in the research process?

A second driver of anthropology’s engagement with openness stands in stark contrast to the motivations of many other research communities. Instead of using open practices to increase the reliability or reproducibility of research results (Dudda et al. 2025), social/cultural anthropologists have focused on increasing the generativity of their research materials to spark and support new interpretations. This focus on the multiplication of interpretations extends out from new forms of collaboration, which are as concerned with the knowledge projects of researched communities as with those of disciplinary colleagues (Boyer and Howe 2015). It has moreover provided a new impetus for anthropologists to share not just empirical research materials but also details about their research procedures and analytical processes. This entails developing bespoke documentation practices or adapting more formal metadata schemas in ways that support the production and proliferation of meaning rather than its definitive imposition.

In what follows, we present edited excerpts from interviews we conducted with participants in the three initiatives we profile: the Platform for Experimental Collaborative Ethnography (PECE); Experimental Methods for Ethnographic Research, Gathering, and Exchange (EMERGE); and xcol: An Ethnographic Inventory. Each initiative grew out of engagements with a specific research context, which shaped the modes of representation, styles of interaction, and logics of openness that they adopted. Each is at least as invested in sharing interpretations and the means of making or eliciting them as in sharing “raw” empirical data or other related research materials. Each grapples with a tension between imposing some degree of structure or standardization on materials that are shared and attending to the particular forms that a given research object might invite or even demand. We acknowledge that all three initiatives are based in the Euro-American world and that they should not be taken to stand in for how openness has come to matter—and not—in world anthropologies at large (see Ribeiro 2014).

Our team of three authors conducted unstructured interviews with participants from each of the three initiatives via videoconference in the spring of 2025. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed by Google Cloud’s Speech-to-Text service and then reviewed, corrected, and edited for clarity by the authors. Selections from the interviews were chosen by the authors to include in this article, based on thematic relevance to the special issue as well as commonalities or divergences across projects that arose in the process of reviewing the transcripts. The interviewees were then invited to review an initial draft of the article consisting of these selections and an introduction composed by the authors. In September 2025, the three authors, interviewees, and one

of the issue editors gathered remotely for a group meeting, during which we delved more deeply into the sources of similarity and difference across the three projects. This collective conversation was designed by the issue editors as a means to provide constructive feedback in place of a more traditional peer review, which seemed ill-suited to an interview-based contribution. As authors, we also embraced it as a way of putting the participants of the three initiatives in dialogue with one another. As with the earlier interviews, this group conversation was recorded and subsequently transcribed, first using automated transcription software and then checking against the original recording for veracity. The concluding discussion below draws primarily from this final group conversation. Complete, unedited transcripts of the three interviews and the group conversation have been archived and published by the institutional data repository of Leiden University (Hoffman et al. 2026).

We envision at least two audiences for these interviews and our accompanying commentary. First, these texts offer scholars of open research and professionals working at research-performing organizations, publishers, and funders insight into a disciplinary culture of openness that values the proliferation of interpretations over the corroboration of fact. The extent of consensus on this normative orientation among the anthropologists we interviewed is, we believe, not yet reflected in widespread efforts to promulgate open research, nor even in the recent (and curiously adisciplinary) boomlet of writing on open qualitative research (e.g., Steltenpohl et al. 2025). Second, these texts offer social/cultural anthropologists a critical redescription of research practices in their own field that the initiatives we profile are seeking to supplement, problematize, or modify. For anthropologists who have not been tracking these initiatives closely, the interviews provide a roadmap of one possible future for the discipline.

As Liora O'Donnell Goldensher (2023) has insightfully argued, the open research field site is a rich locus of reflection on what constitutes reliable or legitimate knowledge. As authors, our interest in these sites comes from our experiences not only as trained scholars in anthropology and allied disciplines but as para-academics occupying support roles in a publishing consultancy, university, and library association that cut across an array of research communities. We do not come to these field sites as external observers but as already entangled participants. We thus embody the actor/analyst symmetry described by Hahn et al. (2018): producing our own scholarship, working on scholarly infrastructures, advocating for particular types of open practices, and critically reflecting on all of the above. For para-academics such as ourselves, the open research field site is just as much a work site where we pursue our careers.

Platform for Experimental Collaborative Ethnography (PECE)

<https://worldpece.org>

Interviewees: Kim Fortun is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine; Mike Fortun is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine; Lindsay Poirier is Assistant Professor of Statistics and Data Science at Smith College

Origins and Development

TIMOTHY **We wanted to start with the origins of PECE. Can you give a broad-brush**

W. ELFENBEIN: **description of what kind of projects you were working on, which led to the realization that you needed to build something different?**

MIKE FORTUN: We were all at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in the early 2010s. Kim and I had an anthropology project on air pollution and air quality sciences, how they interacted with communities in a number of cities across the United States and then eventually in India and China. Out of that came the need to share data between those distributed people. So we started with PowerPoint files because we were after a discrete combination of image and text: these kinds of snap-shotty things of what was happening in different cities, different sciences, different communities.

That obviously became unwieldy very quickly, even after the introduction of Dropbox. So we began to think that we needed a different way. We were on a wiki for a while back in the wiki era. But that, too, was not gonna work. We eventually came to building: We started on Plone as a content management system, and for various reasons that did not work out, and then moved to Drupal. We built PECE as a Drupal-based platform. And we were trying to build something different, in part for posterity, like permanent stability, sustainability, and so on, which has continued to be a challenge.

But we were very attuned to the technology infrastructure side of it. And that came about through the start of the Research Data Alliance (RDA), also at RPI at that time, which continues today but at that time was kind of smaller and more informal, and we knew a number of the people involved. We began as ethnographers of the sciences, Kim and I, the environmental health sciences and genomics, and Lindsay of web sciences and eventually data sciences. This was a good way to see these scientific communities in

action as they were trying to figure out how they can open up their data for sharing, often with different disciplines that had different ideas about what data was, what was good data, what you needed to make sense of it, all of that, and then building the infrastructure to do that sharing.

Very quickly we came to realize that, well, this is actually what we are also trying to do. And there was not much of that actually happening in anthropology. There's a scattered, sporadic history of it, but the idea of actively creating and sharing ethnographic data, with its own peculiar or particular qualities, was something that we began to be committed to alongside building the PECE platform.

The archival impulse was very strong: How do we make data last? There was also the publication impulse, asking if there could be new modes of expression for anthropology, which doesn't have to follow the standard article form or the standard monograph form. And that we could write in ways that included data, so that you weren't limited to sharing your data only through the publication but could actually share the data as part of a publication. So those two things became a challenge to put together.

Then we added the third thing, which was to make it a workspace and a place for ethnographic analysis. This came about through observation of the RDA and the big emphasis on metadata: that when you produce data, you had to include which telescope you used, or which generation of this gene sequencer you used. All of that became part of the metadata. And so for ethnographers, metadata is, in part, how did you analyze this? What questions did you ask? Trying to translate those kinds of approaches that were, in our view, inherently open-ended and pluralizable, and not predicated on an end goal of reproducibility, but rather extension and multiplication of perspective and analytic ideas. So PECE's development involved finding a way to incorporate that. And this became one of the biggest technical challenges but also one of the most innovative ones. We created a system for doing that kind of analysis and preserving it and archiving it along with the data. So the analytical notes became a very extensive form of metadata that got attached to the data and was all archived together and was all open so that people could add new questions and offer multiple interpretations.

KIM FORTUN:

One thing to add is that, through Lindsay, we got to know data scientists who were building this kind of infrastructure for diverse scientific communities. They would go out and do their version of ethnography and build data infrastructure for exome scientists or sun scientists, and we had a lot of

meetings with them where they were really frustrated that we didn't think in terms of use cases, which we eventually learned to do.

There was a really formative thread that came out of that: that the way people in other scientific fields really power their science is by working side by side, not just sharing at the end of a project, but by sharing side by side. I think that's core to the PECE project. It's why our analytic structures and the collaborative hermeneutics are right at the center of it.

The thing that gave us some pause was this e-science development cycle that you went through to develop every scientific infrastructure, which just missed some of the stages that were really important to us. Particularly the stage that says that the genre form, whether it's technical or textual, produces effects, and that there's a theory of meaning and language embedded in these systems. That was far from neutral for us. We came in very informed by poststructural ideas of language, which both animate and in some ways work against the grounding of claims in data. That creates this doubly bound space—in my view, in the best of ways.

Intervention and Pedagogy

MARCEL LAFLAMME: **Would you say that PECE calls on researchers in social/cultural anthropology to modify their research practices? To what extent is it about enjoining anthropologists to work differently?**

LINDSAY POIRIER: Pretty early on, as part of development for grant funding, we built this diagram of the invisible components of ethnographic work, or at least those parts that we don't explicitly state as we engage in ethnographic work. What was interesting was trying to articulate these. A lot of the stages that we identified within this workflow need to be exposed in order to engage in collaborative ethnographic work. There are certain implicit things that you hold on to as you devise your theoretical commitments, that you bring to your interpretation as you're figuring out the analytics by which you are going to unpack this ethnographic material. If you're engaging collaboratively, then there's certain aspects of this you have to expose.

Part of the goal of designing PECE in the way that we are is trying to make those moments more explicit. And as part of the data that's being recorded and shared. So it's not just the ethnographic data that's getting shared. It's those pieces, those interpretive moments,

that we're trying to have documented, literally attaching metadata to those moments in order to facilitate more of that collaborative, analytic component.

MIKE FORTUN: You asked how PECE asks anthropologists to change their practices. One is that this is time intensive. This is cumbersome and slow. We're asking people to become data curators. In one sense, they need to realize that if you are producing data, you have to curate it and then you have to save it. So it's a slow process.

PECE asks people to do more work and to make that work more open, which they're not accustomed to, especially for the analytic process. Now we've reformed the permission systems so that it's easier to say, "well, I don't want my comment on this analysis to be public but I'm fine with this one to be public." So it's finer grained, and you can make those kinds of distinctions. Again, that's asking people to think more carefully about what they do want to make public and what they don't, and to take the time to do all of that.

*TIMOTHY
W. ELFENBEIN:*

It seems that the practices you're asking for require a different kind of teaching to create different kinds of anthropologists. How does what you've developed change what needs to be done to create anthropologists?

KIM FORTUN:

That's an interesting question. I've taught experimental ethnographic methods since I first started teaching in the early 1990s, a time when teaching methods was really not in vogue. It was seen as formulaic, Parsonian, etc. And yet everyone was trying to do projects about globalization and all of these hyper-complex objects. I learned to love teaching methods and came to see that methods or research design often shut people down because people get overwhelmed. They either overcommit to a project early on or are miserable because they don't know what their project is.

I created a way of teaching that I now talk about as building out your problem space, not your project, which is akin to the difference of building an archive versus an argument (see Fortun 2009). The questions are: What's your material? What's this space of concern that many projects might emerge out of? I started teaching with things that came to be called sketches, which is really delimited. Exercises like mapping the people in a problem space. You know, don't think about anything else beyond the *fort* and *da* of the open-endedness of the problem space and something specific to do to deepen your characterization of it. That's really worked for my teaching over time.

In some ways, the PECE analytics are a relay of that, because they are meant to be somewhere between the openness of everything that you're working with. They're a way into the data. I think some people would call

the analytics a way of modeling the data. You're going in, and you're seeing it a particular way. But that's not the only way to see it. You could approach the same data through different analytic structures. I think this really goes back to our poststructural sensibilities, of not trying to nail down what something is or means, but multiplying—seeing multiplication of perspectives on a phenomenon as robust knowledge.

I do think we need to teach methods differently, in part because our methods should be really responsive to changing dynamics in the world. If you overcommit early, you're not available for that responsiveness. For so many of the things we work on, none of us is smart enough to figure them out on our own. I think there's a call to collaboration in there.

Openness

MARCEL LAFLAMME:

Do you locate PECE within open research, open science, open infrastructure, or maybe other conversations? Given the different ways that you've intersected with the open movement (or open movements in the plural), how do you locate PECE?

MIKE FORTUN:

Our slogan—I don't know if it's unique to us—is as much as possible, as open as possible. That recognizes it's going to be different for different projects and people. Because we have worked mostly with scientists and communities who are actively engaged with open data, we have had an easier time opening more things up. That's certainly not the case for a lot of anthropologists. We have built PECE so that not everything has to be open and it has permission structures. But it is designed in a way to reverse the usual assumption, or what we call the data ideology of anthropology (Poirier et al. 2020), which is that my data is private, my field books are private, and we can talk about if I could open up this or that. What if you start from the assumption that everything could be open and then figure out what you actually want to make and keep private?

LINDSAY POIRIER:

Coming from a data science world where open is often talked about in a very black and white way, part of what I see in PECE discourse around openness is trying to break down the binary of open versus closed. We've tried to think critically about those middle spaces between open and non-open. How can they be literally infrastructured

into the system? We've tried to think carefully about the double binds of openness, as well as the classical concerns about sensitive information being revealed. We've had cases where people have asked us for very high-security PECE features so that they're not revealing highly sensitive political information, wanting to make sure that everything is fully encrypted and things like this. I hope that we're not dogmatic about openness. I think it's not openness for the sake of openness, but it's openness toward very specific political ends.

KIM FORTUN:

I think it's important to come back to the extent to which our vision for enacting PECE stems from ethnographic work. We didn't start with digital infrastructure. We started with ethnographic work that called us into the work of infrastructure building. It goes back to when I first started working on informatics in the environmental health sciences and toxicology. One of the reasons the toxicologists were investing in data infrastructure was because they were seeing the same thing. There wasn't a rich semiotic space from which to make claims about environmental health. There was nothing to hold on to in order to advance their storytelling. So they made massive investments in data infrastructure, not really being able to promise what it would produce other than more semiotic capacity. And that's the experience all of us have had in our various ethnographic projects and is really an animator for what we do with PECE.

Experimental Methods for Ethnographic Research, Gathering, and Exchange (EMERGE): A Matrix for Ethnographic Collaboration and Practice

<https://www.emergematrix.org>

Interviewees: Gregg Hetherington is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Concordia University, Montreal; Melina Campos Ortiz is a PhD candidate in Social and Cultural Analysis at Concordia University, Montreal; Katie Ulrich is an Academy Scholar at the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies

Origins and Development

TIMOTHY W. ELFENBEIN:

Part of what's interesting to us about EMERGE is the underlying phenomenon, which is the emergence of ethnographic

laboratories. There's now quite a few of them, and they've all popped up in the last, what, 10 years? And EMERGE seems like it's the next step, where there are different laboratories collaborating. But first we'd like to talk about why we are seeing anthropologists and fellow travelers set up labs to begin with.

KREGG HETHERINGTON:

From my perspective, there's a few different things going on. One of them was this experience I had with people who would have been classified as research assistants in the past, folks I had hired in Paraguay to work with me on a very complicated project that required people all over the place and required me often to be absent. And so there was this pragmatic thing where these folks came together, and it ended up being such a lovely working relationship: not without its tensions, but something that was just so generative and productive in ways that I felt I was not seeing reflected in the literature. And so I wanted to think about how you create those scenarios more intentionally.

I also think there is a series of structural things going on in the university. You know, we're producing more PhDs than we have jobs now. So there's an attempt to open up what a humanities PhD is, to think about the skills you acquire along the way that are then going to allow you to get into the job market. While being a bit cynical about that, it's also responding to something that's very important for our students, which is thinking about the future after the degree, and that there might be ways of training graduate students that aren't quite so focused on this extremely narrow product. I know that was part of the impetus for creating our lab here at Concordia, which is not an elite university, and so these issues are very front of mind in a way that they're not necessarily at other places.

And then I would just point to one other thing, which is that the objects of anthropological research have changed. And this goes back to George Marcus (1995), where the things that we want to study are not nearly as easy to study as they might have been to the lone wolf anthropologist. So it was those three things coming together. One was creating community around research. Another was rethinking what grad school might be. But then also thinking about how you study these massive distributed phenomena or these ontologically multiple phenomena,

which was really big at the beginning of all of this. Those seem to lend themselves to a group kind of study, to bring up the lab as a potential. And, of course, there's pushback, even within our group. There are people who hate the word *lab*. But if we think of what the word *lab* is doing generously, I think that's where it's coming from.

MARCEL LAFLAMME:

Can we move on to the origins of what we're now calling EMERGE? It wasn't called that in the initial grant proposal, as I remember: You were calling it Infrastructures of Ethnography.

KREGG HETHERINGTON:

That's right. Initially, the ideas and practices we were experimenting with in the Ethnography Lab at Concordia were all very local. The idea was just: How do you get people who are in the same space to work together in a way that disciplinary anthropology tends to militate against? And so it was very much about creating intellectual community at the local level and figuring out what kinds of affordances this gives ethnographic practice that aren't there when you do your classic, you know, single-player ethnography.

Knowing, as Tim said, that this was happening in a number of different places—we'd been inspired by some of them and there were others popping up all the time—the idea was to say, is there a scaled-up version of this community that we're building that links experiments in different places? We really had the PECE model in mind when we were first thinking about this and applying for funding. We were initially considering working with that platform. The idea was to try to figure out how you take local projects and share data in a way that's both responsible and usable, to spark different kinds of conversations in different places while also building up a larger store of data.

MELINA CAMPOS ORTIZ:

At first, we called it Infrastructures of Ethnography in, let's say, a cheeky way, because a bunch of the people involved were ethnographers of infrastructure (see Larkin 2013). But at the same time, they realized that there was a need for having different infrastructures to do the ethnography of infrastructure. So the idea was to have the proper infrastructure to do collaborative ethnography together.

KREGG HETHERINGTON:

One of the concrete ideas that came to mind early on was imagining what railroad tracks are doing in different cities. So if you had one project that was about how tracks were operating in Philadelphia, you could do another one about how they're operating in Montreal, and then ultimately think about a larger-scale version of what that project is.

I think what we underestimated was exactly the infrastructural question. So it's not just about creating a data platform where you can share things. It's also about the underlying culture of the institutions that you're at. It's also about what the commitments of students and professors are, and all of these kinds of things that actually make it very difficult to move something in that ambitious a direction. It hadn't felt so ambitious until we tried to do it! And then we realized, OK, it's not just about figuring out what the nuggets are that you share. It's really thinking about the culture of what people are doing pedagogically at these institutions. And how uncomfortable people are about sharing unfinished stuff in our humanities disciplines.

You know, we can talk about it as being about ethics and politics, and there's all that as well. But I think there's also this general feeling of it being difficult in the humanities to trust that these materials are going to circulate in ways that we're comfortable with, because disciplinarily, we tend to be so guarded about things until they are ready to publish. And that made it more interesting to think incrementally about these small things we can foster, which are already going on in the discipline or in adjacent disciplines. That started to feel like a more plausible project than trying to start something massive from scratch.

Working with Protocols

MARCEL LAFLAMME:

As I remember it, there was this moment where all of us came together at Concordia in the summer of 2023 (Campos Ortiz 2023). That was this kind of effervescent event, where people were finally together in person after a year of meeting on Zoom. And Katie, you and Andrea Ballestero brought an offering to the group that really captured people's imagina-

tions. Can you talk about the intervention you brought and your sense of how it unfolded from there?

KATIE ULRICH:

During that meeting in Montreal, Andrea and I presented a work-in-progress protocol. The concept of protocol was coming from a book that Andrea had previously coedited, which is called *Experiments in Ethnography* (Ballesterio and Winthereik 2021). And the purpose of that book was to say, OK, look, there's various books on methods and anthropology and fieldwork. But there seems to be a need for a space where people discuss how you do analysis: Like, what's in between data collection and the final fleshed-out, published article or book? How does analysis unfold? Andrea and Brit Ross Winthereik ended up asking the contributors to that book to offer a protocol with very concrete steps, to really try to ground it in, like, what did you concretely do in your analytical practices? And that kind of structure and constraint of delineating those instructions was, I think, what was really generative about those protocols.

Protocol is also a term and a concept that is instrumental in the natural sciences. Having originally come from a molecular biology background, I was very familiar with the protocol and how it functions in lab work. What was a little different about these ethnographic analysis protocols was that they were much more of an invitation for experimentation and play. The aim of them was not to replicate an experiment, to replicate the results of that experiment. So that's a major difference we were thinking about.

When we came to Montreal, the protocol we presented to the group was based on an event that the Ethnography Studio at USC had done that spring. We wanted the group's help in surfacing the necessary steps for running this kind of event, [steps] which we had maybe not identified ourselves because, you know, we had already done the event. Things can be easy to take for granted when you've run these kinds of events before. So it was really fun working with the group and having them ask us questions: How did you actually go about this? What was the process for this aspect? And then we could respond and recognize, ohh, now that you say that, *this* was also a necessary step.

We were really seeking to identify these kinds of submerged practices of collaborative research work, to name them. And many of those are the kind of administrative labor that we also don't value or talk about in the discipline as much. You know,

teaching students how to do their expense reports or, how do you go about reserving a room at your university? Those things also made it into the protocol. So it was also a nice moment of trying to push back against the devaluation of those kinds of practices in the discipline.

That became a project for the second year of EMERGE, for each of the labs to create a protocol for one of their processes for collaboration. We also talked about trying to figure out what would be a good home for these protocols. With the help of Marcel, we decided to explore the online platform protocols.io, which is not exclusively but mostly used by people in the natural sciences. So it was also an exciting opportunity to explore what that platform could do for more humanities and social science-based protocols.

MELINA CAMPOS ORTIZ:

Right now, we have two drafts and two protocols fully published on protocols.io (<https://www.protocols.io/workspaces/emerge-matrix>), out of five research spaces. Three of the labs, the ones in Canada, decided to also write papers that accompany their protocols (e.g., McDonald et al. 2026). So you have the protocol on the platform and then a paper where we describe in more like a storytelling way how we got to the protocol, how it was developed or actually applied.

And it's been challenging. We had a whole session at our lab, because some of us wanted seven steps in the protocol and some people wanted six, and we were stuck there for the longest time. That's why we haven't published it fully. The draft is there. But those things that should be, or that you imagine could be, straightforward: All of us as social scientists, we get so passionate about those things, and everything matters so much! That's why we haven't published the protocol. And I think that is also ethnographic. The fact that it hasn't been published because we don't feel it's there yet.

Openness and Replication

MARCEL LAFHAMME:

By way of closing, I wanted to ask about the extent to which openness has been an important conceptual resource for the work that you've done with EMERGE.

KATIE ULRICH:

I think we're still exploring and thinking about what openness could do for us. It hasn't been a central concept so far, and I think part of that is a resistance to wanting to promote openness for the sake of openness. Being really careful in thinking about what this can bring to the humanities and social sciences, understanding that it's not going to be a matter of just transferring everything that openness means in the natural sciences.

KREGG HETHERINGTON:

Yeah, I'm not sure how much the word *open* is going to be part of the way I think about things going forward. When I first launched EMERGE and the lab as well, with these more open concepts, a big motivation for me was wanting our disciplines to be a little less precious about knowledge and also being vulnerable about these process questions.

That said, I also started the lab very explicitly after I got tenure. It felt like a time in my career when I could expend a bunch of the capital and the security I'd gained, in blowing things up and doing other stuff and trying things out. And I was maybe a little less attuned to the way that openness can engender other kinds of exploitation and other kinds of problems in the discipline. I still love these spaces where we're more open with each other, where we're sharing in a more vulnerable way, where we're seeing work before it's been polished completely. It's definitely the mode that I want to work in. But it's not necessarily something that is easy to normalize quickly, when we're still in an institution that is rewarding certain kinds of things and not others and is enabling the accrual of certain kinds of security at the expense of others.

Similarly, I wonder if we can get past words like *replication*, which was clearly not working for us intellectually, and toward something that I think is the spirit of the protocol. A reflection that one can put down about a process that may also include a documentation of the problems of the process or how to imagine the kinds of tensions and frictions that come up along the way.

I think there's an incredible value to that, and it reaches way beyond anthropology. And until Katie and Andrea proposed protocols as a way of thinking about it—these open protocols that don't replicate but serially create the possibility for thinking about an evolving learning process—we didn't really have a way

of doing it. But now I have a much clearer sense of the kind of thing that we can do in those sorts of spaces.

MELINA CAMPOS ORTIZ:

Yeah, I don't know if someone else could take our protocol and say, I'm going to do the exact same thing. But I do think it gives people some hints of where to go. It helps make sure that all of the weight doesn't go on one person's shoulders. And, of course, people can be asked to share their knowledge, and it's beautiful to ask other people. But it's also great that we can manage to transfer knowledge of how to work together in this way. For me, that's the richest part of the protocol.

xcol: An Ethnographic Inventory

<https://xcol.org>

Interviewees: Tomás Sánchez Criado is the Ramón y Cajal Senior Research Fellow in the Social Sciences at the Open University of Catalonia; Adolfo Estalella is Associate Professor of Social Anthropology at the Complutense University of Madrid

Origins and Development

MARCEL LAFLAMME:

Can you tell us about the origin of xcol, how it arose, and how that relates to your past research interests and commitments?

TOMÁS SÁNCHEZ CRIADO:

Adolfo and I, beyond being colleagues, have also been friends for quite a while. We've shared a lot of spaces, formative spaces but also spaces of activism. And I suppose many of the things that started the process of what at some point became xcol are somehow connected to our trajectory in Spain.

We were part of the community of anthropology and science and technology studies (STS) in Spain, which is not so huge and so we met quite often. And then there was the Indignados movement at some point, and this profoundly affected how we were imagining our work. There was this idea of: "What is happening to the forms in which we are doing fieldwork? How do we call this? We need a new vocabulary. This is not exactly a debate in anthropology. This is not just activist an-

thropology. This is something else.” And much of that work coalesced in the volume *Experimental Collaborations* (Estalella and Sánchez Criado 2018), which we coedited.

In the process of making the book, we needed some sort of website to publicize this book that was not yet out there. We needed a kind of platform to start opening up the discussion. So that became xcol, which is just an abbreviation of the title of the volume. And then we started adding more and more functions to the website. It was somehow an offspring of its time, a time where open science and open culture took root in Spain, very much connected to the Indignados. Open culture was like a jargon, a way of practicing life. It’s dead now, but for many years it was central to most activists in the country, and it also started affecting us.

ADOLFO ESTALELLA:

For the last 10 years, our interest has been reflecting on the changing form of ethnography in the contemporary. So basically we see in our experience—in the experience of many other anthropologists, but ours first—that we are pursuing completely different ways of doing fieldwork, engaging in very experimental practices. At some point, we realized that we were not satisfied with the way that anthropology has accounted for its fieldwork practices, because often we have tended to offer accounts that are not very faithful to the kind of things that we do in fieldwork. We have all of these manuals that tell you how to do ethnography, but they get rid of or don’t pay attention to all of the small gestures that do not fit into the models or traditional methods. But those are very relevant for doing certain kinds of fieldwork.

So there are two questions behind the website. One is, how can we offer accounts of these experimental fieldwork practices that we can witness in many projects today? And what kind of genres should we use to teach them? When you pay attention to all of this experimentation, you realize that each experiment is a situated, local arrangement. Sometimes anthropologists design data infrastructures. Sometimes they are engaged in writing plays with their interlocutors, or they co-create exhibitions. So is there any commonality? How can we offer a method, if each experiment is a completely different response to the specificities

of the empirical encounter? And we say, OK, we cannot offer a manual with a general method. But what we can do is gather all of these different approaches in an archive, or more than that: an inventory.

Very often we contrast the inventory with the manual of methods, because the manuals say: this is the model. And instead of that, we are trying to recover and record all of these very different projects that we think of as examples that can offer inspiration. So the idea is to gather and record and include as many creative or experimental ethnographic projects as possible.

TOMÁS SÁNCHEZ CRIADO:

We started with our own fieldsites, the very places and projects and practices that we were contaminated by. We were transformed deeply by open culture, and our inspiration for this whole process has come from that field of practice, from open culture or free culture as a domain. The vocabulary of the recipe, the inventory, the open archive has been with us for 10 years. And there have been many projects in our surroundings by different—mostly architecture and design—collectives. They were picking up gadgets or devices or contraptions from popular culture around the world and then synthesizing them and documenting them and offering them as possible resources for the imagination of a different design culture. Many of these collectives have been working out the idea of having open databases that others could be replicating, downloading—not just the content per se but also the data structure that would be open for everyone to replicate, transform, amend.

While these projects were addressed to forms of design that are at the fringes of design, our interest was in putting them at the very core of ethnography. Ethnography, as an act of invention, also requires its own genre of documentation. And so we spent more than a year and a half with some of those designers, working on the website that you can see now.

The Problem of Format

ANDREW S. HOFFMAN:

What are some of the challenges you've seen that get in the way of producing better documentation?

TOMÁS SÁNCHEZ CRIADO:

To be honest, one of the worst problems we have is that it is extremely difficult to get entries for the inventory. The level of curation and editorial supervision that this requires is beyond our everyday capabilities. We cannot be a very fast publishing endeavor, and this has to do with what we are documenting: The unit of documentation we are using is somehow difficult to navigate. It requires a conceptual intervention for many people to understand, and so you first need to convince them to document things in the way you want. They need to understand the reasons behind it. And then we go into the problematics of writing things down, which are always complicated, and the editorial process becomes extremely cumbersome sometimes. So I think the genre we have invented for the inventory is both its best asset and the thing that makes it all very complicated and cumbersome.

It's difficult to get regular entries. Someone approaches us saying, "Hey, I wrote down a description of my own field device." And then you need to go through it and give a round of comments: Is that really the field device? And what is it, you know? It's a very intense curatorial project that we don't know how to delegate. But we have been investing a lot of time in developing—I wouldn't like to call them standards, but maybe stabilized approaches to how to write up a field device and in what number of words, using a file card that has very specific entries. And some people have said, "But if each method is inventive, then there shouldn't be a single way of documenting them all." But what we are thinking of is like recipe books, which somehow use a similar form that allows you to also witness difference.

Having a similar format makes it possible for you to identify that, even if you think you have been doing something very similar, there are so many differences in the things you were interested in and the ways you approached them. This is what our file cards are for, and how we have been pushing people to write about their projects as field devices. But this has been a horribly complicated endeavor—making people document in a way that they were not used to—because for many people the methods are something that you do at the very end of your project, in a retrospective account, or else it's something that is so imbricated in the way you think that you cannot differentiate it. But we had the idea that a similar format could show two people approach-

ing apparently similar problems that there are tiny differences: either in the setting, in the people they are working with, in the components of the recipe. All of a sudden, you see that you were devising different fields for different kinds of inquiry.

So that is why we went for a standard way of writing, which makes diversity and difference more commensurable and identifiable. We have struggled a lot, inventing the genres of description and then asking people to conform or comply with them. In anthropology, people are not used to this—they are used to saying, “I want my own authorship in this.” And then it’s like, OK, of course, but write with this structure, work with these procedures, and maybe that will inaugurate another way of being able to narrate what you have been doing.

Description over Prescription

MARCEL LAFLAMME:

To what extent does the project call on anthropologists to modify their research practices?

ADOLFO ESTALELLA:

We try to avoid any kind of prescriptive gesture; instead, we tend to think that our goal is descriptive. And this is very clear in the last book that we edited, *An Ethnographic Inventory* (Sánchez Criado and Estalella 2023), in which one of the goals was to argue that creativity and invention are relevant in any kind of ethnographic project. So instead of thinking of ethnography as applying a method that any anthropologist is going to use, we try to adjust and modify and respond to situations. In this book, we are arguing that ethnography is an act of relational invention. When we are doing fieldwork, we invent the conditions to relate to our interlocutors. And then, when we analyze and write, we are inventing relations again in the sense of descriptive accounts of the kinds of engagement we have had. Our argument is that we have not been paying enough attention to all of this creativity and invention that is essential to any kind of ethnographic engagement. So the goal is, OK, let’s offer accounts that are faithful to the kind of empirical engagement that anthropologists have in their fieldwork.

TOMÁS SÁNCHEZ CRIADO:

If there is anything programmatic about what we are doing, it is redescribing the way in which we tend to talk about ethnogra-

phy. Instead of the orderly archive of the manual as a prescriptive technique, what we would like to offer is another kind of a learning or teaching tool that connects more to the faithful registration of our field practices. Not as normative, in the sense of what you should be doing, but as a compelling archive of the many fleeting, floating, transforming ways of doing fieldwork that others have come to. If there is anything prescriptive about what we are saying, it has to do with: “Hey, others have done it, why can’t you?” If others have done it, then maybe you could do something slightly different. And that is this opening at the ground of the possible, by more faithfully documenting the existing.

I also have the feeling that our project speaks not only to anthropologists. By making anthropology more reflective about these inventive practices, we might also make it more interesting for many other people. By making aesthetically pleasing things for other societal actors, we believe that anthropology could become not just a discipline, but an experimental collaboration. So if there is anything that I believe we could be doing with the institutionalization of practices like ours, it would be to make anthropology more porous, which is more interesting! More interpenetrated by other ways of doing. More fun, in a non-irrelevant way.

Discussion

During the group meeting held in September 2025, participants reflected on commonalities and divergences across their respective projects. All three initiatives share an impulse to make knowledge practices that are presently tacit or invisible in published research outputs more explicit and available for critical reflection, if not necessarily open per se. Broadly speaking, EMERGE and xcol share an interest in documenting practices that generate or elicit empirical data, while PECE is more concerned with managing and making sense of those data.

Each of the three initiatives proposes some version of what PECE describes as “light structure” (Poirier et al. 2014) for the documentation they seek to enable, which allows for discovery, comparison, and further iteration by others while keeping an emphasis on usability and fidelity to the source material. Yet contributors to all three initiatives reported encountering a degree of resistance when they asked colleagues to engage

with this light structure—or, indeed, tried to use it themselves. We suggest that this resistance may proceed from an ideology of innovation at the level of representational form that took root in social/cultural anthropology in the wake of the *Writing Culture* debates of the 1980s. This is itself perhaps part of a broader ideology of “institutionally reinforced individualism” (Poirier et al. 2020, 222) within anthropology and across the humanities and social sciences, which also manifests in anthropologists’ tendency to keep their data close and assume that only they can responsibly steward those materials. Without seeking to uproot these aspects of the field’s epistemic culture, emerging forms of open research in social/cultural anthropology may need to ask anthropologists to sit with their unease at the introduction of (someone else’s) structure and to consider the affordances of its adoption—especially as it relates to enabling collaboration both within the discipline and beyond it (see Lemov et al. 2020).

Participants were also invited to reflect on challenges around interoperability and long-term preservation that they encounter in their respective projects. One motivation for this line of questioning was to think about how bespoke, discipline-specific initiatives may be able to interface with extant open research infrastructures, which are often better resourced and may provide users with functionality that the discipline-specific initiatives lack. For example, imagine a corpus of research materials collected in a PECE instance, for which PECE itself cannot ensure durable long-term preservation. Configuring PECE to be interoperable with a formal data repository service such as Harvard Dataverse would give PECE users the possibility of “pushing” their materials from PECE to Dataverse, which would guarantee some level of long-term preservation and mint a persistent identifier such as a DOI for the corpus, making those materials more findable, accessible, and citable.

As the participants from PECE recounted during our group meeting, however, this type of technical integration tends to be some of the most challenging design work to undertake. It comes with financial challenges, since such integrations require funding to cover the cost of development, but it also presents epistemic challenges insofar as mapping the highly customized metadata captured in PECE onto the metadata schemas of extant infrastructures risks losing the former’s rich granularity (see Edwards et al. 2011). Even if these challenges could be overcome, one participant from xcol wondered whether a focus on developing and maintaining digital platforms might lead to a future for knowledge that is ultimately more fragile than one that remains grounded in print formats: “I have a feeling that a crappy [paper] zine someone gave me in an activist space three years ago is something that I might still have in 30 or 40 years, more so than the kind of website that we have been developing.”

There is also the matter of who owns and governs the digital infrastructures that support more open research practices. On this issue, EMERGE represents something of a counterpoint to PECE and xcol, in that participants did not develop their own

technical infrastructure but instead opted to use an existing platform, protocols.io, to document their practices. Although this platform was initially developed with the life sciences in mind, EMERGE members embraced an ethos of “hacking” the platform to make it useful for their own purposes as social/cultural anthropologists. Just as this experimentation was getting underway, however, protocols.io was acquired by Springer Nature, one of the world’s largest for-profit publishers. While the acquisition brought a fresh round of investment into the platform, it also oriented their efforts away from interdisciplinary exchange and toward scaling up the adoption of protocol sharing and integrating it into mainstream scientific publishing.

Finally, we want to reflexively acknowledge that the proliferation of interpretations our participants took as the horizon of openness makes a kind of intuitive sense to the three of us as authors of this article, given that we were trained in the same intellectual traditions as our interlocutors from PECE, xcol, and EMERGE. Yet our exposure to other professional spaces structured by more dominant logics of open research prompted us to close our group meeting with a provocative question: Is there a point past which the proliferation of interpretations loses its value, especially in a political and epistemic context increasingly characterized as post-truth (Langlitz and Dan-Cohen 2025)?

In the brief exchange that followed, our participants gestured toward several possible responses that merit further development. One invoked a distinction from psychoanalytic theory between interpretation and analysis, the latter of which has a solidity that results from the work of staying with its object, sometimes for years. In this light, all interpretations are welcome but may not be accorded equal weight. Another cast the proliferation of meaning as an ethical practice of anti-fascism, at a moment when the crystallization of disinformation as official doctrine looms large across the world. Marked as this moment is by a concomitant dismantling of infrastructures for inquiry once believed to be solid, it may also point the open research movement away from the centralization of infrastructure toward an unruly, but resilient proliferation of the very sort seen in the initiatives we have chronicled here.

Data Availability Statement

Complete, unedited transcripts for the three project-specific interviews and the final group conversation excerpted or otherwise referenced in this article have been archived and published under a CC BY 4.0 license in the Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology (CADS) collection of LUDaR, the institutional data repository of Leiden University. They are openly available at <https://doi.org/10.34894/XTCOQD>.

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