

Society for Cultural Anthropology Roundtable  
**Beyond (the familiar) Text:**  
**Anthropological Innovations in Method, Form, and Content**  
 Convener: Yarimar Bonilla; Speakers: Elizabeth Povinelli, Jason De Leon,  
 Natasha Myers, S Lochlann Jain, Elaine Gan/Anna Tsing, Steven Feld  
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What “Beyond?” ... “Beyond” What?

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I’m happy to take in today’s conversation as progressive and hopeful. But I also wish to inject a cautionary tale into the mix. This is because I sense a larger disciplinary reality, one that structurally reproduces the marginality of non-textual work in anthropology today.

In 2007 Rupert Cox and Andrew Irving, anthropologists at the University of Manchester and Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, and Christopher Wright, a visual anthropologist at Goldsmiths, convened an international conference in Manchester titled “Beyond Text?” A question mark appeared, provocatively, at the end of the word “text.”

The book and DVD from this project, edited by the trio that animated the conference, will appear shortly from Manchester University Press, under the title Beyond Text? (question mark retained) Critical Practices and Sensory Anthropology. The publisher’s website pitches it this way: “Beyond Text? is about the relationship between anthropological understandings of the world, sensory perception, and aesthetic practices. It suggests that if different sensory experiences embody and facilitate different kinds of knowledge, then we need to develop new methods and more creative forms of representation that are not based solely around text or on correspondence theories of truth. The volume brings together leading figures in anthropology, visual, and sound studies to explore how knowledge, sensation and embodied experiences can be researched and represented by combining different visual, aural and textual forms which it demonstrates through an accompanying DVD.”

Articulating with the conference, Rupert Cox organized, for the University of Manchester’s Whitworth Gallery, an immersive multi-sensory exhibition. Opening before and extending beyond the conference events, the work displayed was titled “The Castaways Project.” It featured some 600 “castaways,” sculptural paintings by the visual artist Virginia Ryan, each a 8” x 11” collage constructed from objects carried out by tide and then carried back onto beaches in front of slave forts along the Ghana coast. Hung in wave-like rows of 75, and stacked nine rows high, these Castaways sensuously engage the washings-in and

washings-out of colonialism, gold, slavery, and displacements on the West African coast. This exhibit wave wall was immersed in a 5.1 surround sound environment that I composed from ocean field recordings as an acoustic evocation of where the Gold Coast becomes the Black Atlantic. The installation additionally features my video, “Where Water Touches Land,” about the materials and art making process. In addition to its articulation with the Beyond Text? conference, the Castaways installation had two other special resonances, as 2007 marked both the 50th anniversary of Ghana’s independence from Britain, and the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of slavery by British Parliament.

Aside from art events at the Whitworth, which included a public session that anthropologist Don Brenneis moderated featuring Ryan and me in conversation with novelist and essayist Caryl Phillips, celebrated author of The Atlantic Sound, The European Tribe, and The Nature of Blood, I was also asked to give one of the conference keynotes. My title, meant to connect with the Whitworth “Castaways” exhibit, was “Water’s Currents.” Adapted for text from a commissioned radio piece I had previously made with Helmi Jarviluoma for Radio Atelje in Finland, the piece combined photography, video, audio, and texts from multiple languages to sensuously juxtapose various aesthetic and political currents of water motion in Papua New Guinea, Japan, Finland, and Ghana. I did not present an academically framed paper. Rather, in keeping with the question mark in “Beyond Text?” the piece theorized water’s currents through relational logics of sensuous materiality. I closed the talk with a screening of the “Where Water Touches Land” video to reference the Whitworth installation, and to foreground collaborative projects joining image and sound, anthropology and art practice, aesthetics and politics.

I’ve provided these contextual details to now tell you what happened in the following days. Namely, anthropologists attending “Beyond Text?” asked me if I was going to write about the images and sounds that I projected. They asked if I would or could “make it more legible.” They asked me what theories it all related to. And they urged me to turn up the volume on politics, as if equal concern with aesthetics somehow denigrated power as the “real” subject of proper anthropology. And the artists, well, they talked to me about the art, about the materials and the processes, and about the larger world of visual and acoustic references shared, suggested, or evoked. Some also had things to say about politics, but, recalling the graceful prose of Caryl Phillips, not with a sledgehammer.

I wasn’t surprised by any of this this. For forty years anthropologists pretty much only speak to me about what I write, artists about what I make. Art register literacy levels in anthropology, either for visual or sound media, have not changed radically, and remain generally low. And the “writing culture” moment likely did more, not less, to fetishize textuality, even if it provoked more

sophisticated concern with representation. So: do I care that American Anthropologist never reviewed The Castaways Project publication art catalog, CD and DVD? Not really. A good review in Art Forum was quite enough. Meaning: I think Margaret Mead got it right in her 1975 rant “Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words.” Until cultural anthropology formally institutionalizes the kind of cross-disciplinary skilling that creates considerably higher literacy and execution skills in sonic media, visual media, and multimedia, and until anthropologists are in much more everyday and deeper conversation with art practices, the most important part of the title “Beyond Text?” will remain the question mark.

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2007 Virginia Ryan, Steven Feld, The Castaways Project. (Catalog/CD/DVD)  
Santa Fe: VoxLox.

<http://www.virginiaryanart.ifp3.com/#/page/the-castaways-project-2003-2007/>

<http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/ryanfeld>

<http://voxlox.myshopify.com/collections/all/products/virginia-ryan-steinen-feld-the-castaways-project>

2010 Steven Feld with Virginia Ryan, Collaborative Migrations: Contemporary Art in/as Anthropology, *in* Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, eds., Between Art and Anthropology, Berg, pp. 109-125; online at:

<http://www.virginiaryanart.ifp3.com/page/collaborative-migrations-in-africa/#/page/collaborative-migrations-in-africa/>