

THEMED ESSAYS

AI and Business Anthropology: Introduction to the Themed Essays

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Abstract

When we put out the call for this themed issue, we placed a single question at its center: Does contemporary AI represent a fundamental shift for business anthropology – or not? More specifically, we asked whether AI marks a genuine break from the digital turn already underway in the field, or whether it is better understood as a cumulative extension of it. This introduction traces what nine essays found: a field mid-conversation, not mid-consensus. The essays, largely from a United States vantage point, approach the question from genuinely different positions – as interpreters, critics, builders, designers, and practitioners whose working lives are already shaped by AI in ways they cannot set aside. Rather than advancing a single argument, the collection offers a conversation in which contributors disagree about the nature of the shift AI represents, about whether the discipline’s primary obligation is interpretive or productive, and about the mood with which practitioners are navigating a moment of genuine uncertainty. With these questions unresolved, the introduction closes by asking: what if? If those who believe that AI is already reshaping the conditions of anthropological work prove correct, the implications may extend beyond methodology to something more fundamental: a transformation in what it means to know anthropologically and, ultimately, in what it means to be an anthropologist.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence, Digital turn, Agentic AI, AI anthropology, Organizational culture, Ethnographic practice, Human-AI collaboration.

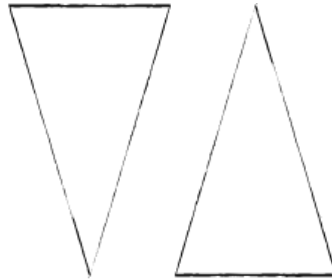
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JBA
Early View

© The Author(s) 2026
ISSN 2245-4217

www.cbs.dk/jba

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.22439/jba.v15i1.7807>



When we drafted the call for papers for this special issue, we placed a single question at its center: Does contemporary AI represent a fundamental shift for business anthropology – or not? The question emerged from a prior observation, documented in the *Journal of Business Anthropology* in 2023, that this journal’s published literature had barely engaged with digital anthropology, data science, or AI across the preceding decade (Artz 2023). Even so, evidence from practitioner communities, social media, and job markets suggested that the digital turn was already well underway in practice. The published record had simply not caught up.

Yet, in the two years since that observation, organizational AI adoption has risen from 55% in 2023 to 88% in 2025, and global corporate investment in AI has more than doubled in the same period (Sajadieh et al. 2026). In tandem, AI has become an increasingly contested topic among business anthropologists on LinkedIn, with practitioners across the community debating its implications for their methods and the future of work in organizations. Published literature outside of business anthropology proper is also beginning to reflect that disagreement (Yu 2026; Artz 2026b; Duke 2025; Gordon 2025; Jowsey et al. 2025; Søtoft, Kocksch, and Munk 2024; Madsen, Munk, and Søtoft 2023; Munk, Olesen, and Jacomy 2022). Accordingly, we chose to frame the issue as a revisitation of the digital turn in light of AI’s expanding

role, inviting contributors to examine both how AI might be transforming the business contexts anthropologists study and how it might also be reshaping anthropological practice itself, recognizing these as interconnected rather than separate phenomena (Artz 2026a).

This themed issue is an attempt to bring that conversation more fully into the published literature of the field. The nine essays gathered here do not represent a single view of AI's implications for business anthropology, nor were they intended to. They represent something more valuable at this stage: a range of perspectives from practitioners, researchers, educators, and builders who are navigating these questions from inside the work rather than observing it from a distance. Together they mark a moment in which the discipline of business anthropology is beginning, in print and in public, to reckon with what AI means for what it does and what it is.

The reason that this question has proved so difficult to settle is that it sits inside a larger one which the discipline has been asking for decades: What business anthropology is for, how it does its work, and what it is distinctively equipped to contribute (Vangkilde, Breslin, and Lex 2025; Malefyt 2023; Jordan 2012; Moeran et al. 2012; Moeran and Garsten 2012). Whether the focus was organizational culture (Ferraro and Briody 2017), consumer research and marketing (Sunderland and Denny 2007; Malefyt and Morais 2012; Malefyt and Moeran 2003), design (Miller and Hitch 2018; Smith et al. 2016), or, most recently, the digital turn that reshaped business practice well before this journal's published literature caught up with it (Artz 2023), each of these moments arrived with a version of that question, and each time the answer carried practical weight. If the shift was substantive, the discipline had to assess which of its existing theories and methods remained adequate to the new context and which genuinely required rethinking. If the shift proved more incremental, the task was consolidation rather than renovation; that is, doing what the field already knew how to do, only better, in new conditions.

The essays in this issue reflect that disagreement. What we present is not a chorus but a conversation, and the disagreements run in several directions. Some contributors argue that contemporary AI represents a genuine rupture from previous digital transformations, one that demands new theories, new methods, and new institutional arrangements. Others see it as a cumulative extension of the digital turn, and argue that the more pressing challenge is disciplinary will rather than conceptual novelty. Still others focus less on

the nature of the shift than on a more specific and unsettling possibility: that AI is not simply changing what business anthropologists study, but may also be doing things that business anthropologists do, or something close enough to raise the question. That claim is itself contested. Several contributors argue that what AI produces lacks the interpretive depth, contextual grounding, and relational accountability that anthropological work requires, thus making the resemblance more superficial than it may appear. Running through all of these disagreements is a disagreement of mood: Some essays carry a visible nervousness about what AI means for the discipline and for the practitioners in it, while others carry an equally visible energy about what it opens up. In some cases, both moods appear within the same piece, sometimes within the same paragraph – a sign, we think, of a discipline genuinely mid-reckoning.

Or is it a United States reckoning? With one exception, the contributors to this issue are based in the United States, and their cases and concerns are shaped by this specific situatedness in ways that will be more or less visible depending on where the reader sits. That situatedness matters because AI is a global phenomenon whose implications and experiences vary considerably across contexts, and because what counts as a discipline mid-reckoning may look quite different from Copenhagen, Lagos, or São Paulo than it does from New York or San Francisco. We flag this not as a limitation to apologize for but as an invitation: We hope that the collection will encourage parallel and contrasting work from business anthropologists in places whose vantage points we cannot, and should not, speak for.

What follows is a walk through the nine contributions, arranged so that the more general framings come first, the sectoral and case-based pieces come in the middle, and the essays that look most directly at the discipline's future come at the end.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS

Alexandra Mack opens the collection with “Beyond the Human Metaphor: Integrating AI into 21st-Century Business Culture,” which takes as its starting point the long human habit of imagining machines as people. Mack argues that, when applied to AI, this habit obscures both the limits of machine cognition and the distinctive value of human judgment, contextual awareness,

and relational skill. Drawing on examples from corporate practice, including the Philadelphia Inquirer's archive-based research assistant and AI applications in drug development, Mack identifies three characteristics of AI integrations that tend to work: specificity of application, curated data inputs, and clear role delineation between what machines do and what people do. Her more pointed argument – and one that echoes through several later essays – is that anthropomorphizing AI not only misleads organizations about what the technology cannot do, but also forecloses imagination about what the technology might do on its own terms.

Robert J. Morais addresses a more specific audience in “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad AI? Fear and Loathing of AI and How Business Anthropologists Can Get Over It.” Writing for anthropologists who are hesitant to use generative AI (GenAI), Morais summarizes the barriers that have made many practitioners reluctant to incorporate it into their work, including concerns about nuance, bias, hallucination, data protection, first-hand research, professional ethos, replacement, and environmental cost. Rather than dismissing those concerns, he argues that GenAI, used judiciously, can augment rather than replace anthropological insight. Drawing on examples from market research, cultural anthropology, transcript analysis, theory-informed prompting, and his own experiments with ChatGPT, Morais illustrates how AI can support research design, analysis, ideation, and interpretation while leaving final judgment with the anthropologist. Read alongside Mack’s piece, the two essays establish the collection’s central tension from the outset: the critical caution that keeps methods honest and the open curiosity that keeps them generative.

Autumn D. McDonald zooms in on the market research industry in “Anthropology in Market Research and Artificial Intelligence: Crossroads of Opportunity or Forthcoming Pitfalls?,” which explores a field that has eagerly embraced AI with promises of greater speed, lower costs, and less laborious work. Drawing on industry surveys, empirical research on synthetic respondents and AI-moderated interviews, and studies of bias in large language models (LLMs), including WEIRD bias and the “AI-AI bias” through which LLMs favor LLM-presented options more than humans do, McDonald argues that the industry’s enthusiasm for speed and cost savings is running ahead of the evidence. Her central contention is not that AI has no place in market research, but that its appropriate use requires careful evaluation of accuracy,

depth, power, culture, cognition, and research quality. In a world saturated with AI tools and synthetic alternatives, she argues, high-quality human data remains the true differentiator. Anthropologists working inside market research are therefore especially well positioned to assess where AI can help, where it distorts, and where human-led research remains indispensable.

Yaya Ren brings the collection into a neonatal intensive care unit in “Attuning Algorithms: Designing AI for Relational Intelligence for Patient Care.” The essay is built around an internal design meeting at PreeMe, the digital health startup Ren founded, in which she finds herself in conversation with her engineering team about whether the system’s AI chatbot should have a human name. The question is not treated as an aesthetic matter but as an ontological and organizational one, since a named chatbot in a neonatal intensive care unit becomes a different kind of actor than an unnamed system, with different implications for trust, authority, parent-clinician relationships, and parent-infant bonding. The essay introduces three concepts: vi(abilities), relational ecologies, and relational return on investment, which together make the case for designing AI in high-stakes care environments as a relational intelligence bridge – accountable, assistive, and consequential, but not personified. It is one of the collection’s clearest demonstrations of what anthropological design judgment looks like when it is doing its most consequential work.

Melissa Vogel’s “‘The Wizard’ of AI” offers an account of what it is like to be a researcher inside a company committed to AI adoption even when research findings complicate that commitment. Drawing on her work in the tech industry, Vogel describes leading a study of low adoption of an AI coding-assist tool among approximately 13,000 engineers, finding that only the most junior engineers found the tool useful while more experienced engineers considered its output intern-level and a waste of time. The essay then follows the political and ethical problem of communicating those findings to senior leadership in an environment where favorable results were expected. It is partly a diagnosis of organizational confirmation bias around AI and partly a careful account of how anthropologists and social scientists in industry can preserve research integrity while remaining politically effective enough to keep a seat at the table. The footnote that no AI tools were used in writing the essay is, among other things, a telling methodological disclosure.

Timothy de Waal Malefyt and Matt Artz take a sharp theoretical turn in “The Magical Power of Words in Large Language Models.” Rather than treating AI primarily as a mysterious or dangerous “dark magic,” they read LLMs through anthropological and linguistic theories of magic as a potentially positive transformative force, drawing on John L. Austin’s performative language, Stanley Tambiah’s analysis of magical rites, and Alfred Gell’s concept of enchantment. They argue that effective prompt engineering functions as a form of ritual practice with three constituent elements: clear and specific language, contextual framing, and structured sequencing. Through case studies from the AI Anthropology Toolkit, the essay demonstrates how prompts function less like technical commands than like carefully structured invocations that mediate a cybernetic relationship between human expertise and computational pattern recognition. Read alongside Mack’s essay, the two pieces illuminate the same terrain from different angles: While Mack cautions against projecting human qualities onto AI, Malefyt and Artz show how distinctly human cultural frameworks can help make sense of the relational mode that working with LLMs involves.

Lora Koycheva makes the case for what she calls an entrepreneurial move in “Scaling Anthropology Through AI: An Entrepreneurial Move.” Drawing on a collaboration with a European robotics startup and a critical reading of the digital anthropology literature, Koycheva argues that anthropology has been quick to interpret successive technological turns and slow to scale, own, or productize its own epistemic and ethical contributions. As a result, the discipline risks remaining an insightful but marginal interpreter of technologies which it neither owns nor productizes. Generative AI, by lowering the barriers to venture creation and cultural production, offers business anthropology a chance to move from cultural interpretation to cultural production: building products, platforms, formats, and ventures that carry anthropological knowledge to wider publics. That prescription sits in productive tension with the next essay.

Adam Gamwell and Phil Surles take a different path to a related diagnosis in “Reclaiming Relevance: A New Agenda for Business Anthropology in the Age of AI.” While Koycheva’s prescription is entrepreneurial, theirs is public-facing and methodological, centered on narrative, visibility, and the disciplined use of AI-enabled research infrastructure. They argue that anthropology faces a widening relevance gap: Its expertise is urgently needed in

public conversations about culture, work, technology, and AI, yet much of its most adaptive practice remains fragmented, proprietary, or hidden behind client work and NDAs. The essay identifies emerging capabilities in business anthropology, including computational fluency, agile and rapid research methods, interpretive data friction, provenance-tracked AI collaboration, and human-AI divisions of labor. Its call is to move that quiet competence into public-facing engagement, using accessible narrative, methodological transparency, and traceable evidence before public conversations about culture, work, and AI are shaped primarily by actors who can mimic anthropological fluency without contributory expertise.

Matt Artz closes the collection with “From Digital Turn to Agentic Turn: Continuity and Rupture in Business Anthropology,” returning to his 2023 observation that business anthropology’s published literature had barely engaged digital anthropology, data science, or AI, even though the digital turn was already well underway in practice. Artz argues that AI’s rapid organizational adoption has moved the digital turn from an emerging possibility to a disciplinary reality, and that the field is already facing something more consequential: an agentic turn. Agentic AI represents both continuity and rupture. It builds on business anthropology’s long-standing theoretical and methodological foundations for studying organizational culture, technological change, situated knowledge, and human-machine relations, while also introducing systems that can act autonomously, pursue goals across extended timeframes, and participate in research workflows rather than merely serving as tools operated by a human. The AI Anthropology Toolkit and multi-agent ethnography serve as examples of what proactive engagement might look like, while raising the larger question of how anthropological knowing and doing is re-organized when agentic AI becomes a new participant in the assemblages through which interpretation, judgment, and accountability are produced.

WHAT IF?

Taken together, these nine essays represent one moment in a larger and still unfolding conversation about what it means to practice business anthropology in the presence of AI. What they do not yet fully grapple with is the question highlighted in the above headline: what if? What if AI systems come to participate meaningfully in cultural analysis, moderating interviews, interpreting

behavioral patterns, and generating analytical insights from ethnographic data? Some contributors believe that this trajectory is already underway. Others remain skeptical entirely. But if it continues, the question of how and by whom anthropological knowledge is produced becomes genuinely uncertain. Whether that knowing still resides primarily with the human researcher, or whether agentic AI introduces a qualitatively new kind of participant in the assemblage through which anthropological knowledge is produced, is a question that this collection raises but cannot yet resolve. The practical questions came first, as they should. The epistemological ones are just coming into view. And should AI prove capable of participating meaningfully in anthropological work, the question may ultimately be not whether it represents a technological shift, but whether it represents something more profound: a transformation in the conditions of anthropological knowing itself and, ultimately, of what it means to be an anthropologist.

We hope that someone out there will take up the call and that the question not fully resolved by this collection – what it means to be an anthropologist in the presence of AI – finds the sustained engagement it deserves, wherever that work is done.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As guest editors, we are grateful to Kasper Tang Vangkilde, Samantha Dawn Breslin, and Simon Lex for the opportunity to bring this collection into the *Journal of Business Anthropology*. We are also grateful for the contributors, for their contributions and commitments to the never-ending anthropological project of what it means to be human, especially in a world of AI agents.

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