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From Digital Turn to Agentic Turn: Continuity and Rupture in Business Anthropology

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Abstract

Business anthropology faces a moment of simultaneous continuity and rupture. As adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) accelerates across US organizations, the digital turn has moved from emerging possibility to disciplinary reality. Yet, the field is already standing at the threshold of something more consequential: an emerging agentic turn, characterized by AI systems capable of delegated autonomous action, goal-directed reasoning, and participation in research itself. While the theoretical and methodological foundations of business anthropology remain necessary, whether they are sufficient for the agentic turn is a question that this essay addresses. What the agentic turn introduces is an issue that prior computational approaches to interpretation only partially posed: What do anthropological knowing and doing consist of when systems can pursue interpretive goals autonomously across entire workflows rather than serving as discrete tools? In this essay, I examine both what the field brings to this moment and what the agentic turn may require beyond it. The AI Anthropology Toolkit and the multi-agent ethnography framework demonstrate one approach to what becomes possible when anthropological sensibilities shape computational systems from the ground up. In addition, it points towards why the choice is not whether to engage with agentic AI, but how to engage collectively, from inside the practice, during a formative period when the design choices that will shape these systems are still being made.

Keywords

AI anthropology, Agentic AI, Agentic turn, Computational ethnography.

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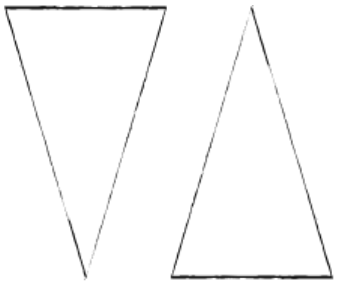

Recently, I directed parallel coding agents to run on the same interview corpus, each configured to a different theoretical orientation. One agent applied a business anthropology lens, attending to organizational practice and the cultural dimensions of technological adoption. A second applied a science and technology studies lens, attending to how participants articulated relationships between technical systems and social arrangements. A third applied a critical lens, attending to questions of power, structural constraint, and whose interests the technology served. My role was not to perform the coding but to adjudicate the agentic outputs, determining which divergences signaled genuine interpretive alternatives, then integrating what the agents surfaced into an analysis I would not have produced on my own. The analytical workflow that might once have required a team now runs through a single researcher and a coordinated set of agents, with the researcher's role shifting from analyst to orchestrator and adjudicator, a configuration I have developed more fully elsewhere as multi-agent ethnography (Artz 2026d).

This is not how my computational practice operated as recently as in 2023. Back then, my toolkit relied largely on no-code and low-code platforms designed for marketing analytics or data science rather than for anthropological inquiry, and adapting them to approximate anthropological work required considerable effort. By 2024, that practice had transformed. As AI coding

tools became sophisticated enough to require fewer revisions, I began building purpose-built AI systems grounded in anthropological practices. Where I once adapted generic tools to approximate anthropological work, I now collaborate with AI systems to build tools that operationalize anthropological concepts from the ground up. This shift, which began in early 2024 and accelerated through 2025 with the rise of agentic AI, points to a dual reality that I explore in this essay: the enduring relevance of anthropological theory and method alongside a genuine rupture in how that work can be done.

This shift in my own practice mirrors a broader transformation. AI has moved from experimentation to routine use, with organizational adoption rising from 55% in 2023 to 78% in 2024 and 88% in 2025 (Sajadieh et al. 2026). Generative AI has followed a similar trajectory, with 79% of organizations reporting regular use in at least one business function. Investment has accelerated alongside adoption, with global corporate AI spending reaching US$ 581.69 billion in 2025, more than doubling from the previous year. This growth is generating demand for what industry reports characterize as "AI+X practitioners that span industries" (Special Competitive Studies Project 2025); that is, professionals who can combine technical literacy with domain expertise in fields such as anthropology. Beyond organizations, generative AI has diffused with unusual speed, reaching approximately 53% population-level adoption within three years, faster than the early adoption trajectories of the personal computer or the internet (Sajadieh et al. 2026).

Yet, even as AI accelerates, business anthropology is still playing catch-up. As I documented in 2023 (Artz 2023a), the field's literature had barely engaged with digital anthropology, data science, or AI across the prior decade. And while engagement is growing with traditional machine learning and, more recently, generative AI, we already stand at the threshold of something new: agentic AI, characterized by systems that can act as autonomous agents, taking delegated action across extended timeframes. Building on the foundation of the digital turn, I argue that the emerging agentic turn represents a rupture that demands new ways of doing and knowing, with the potential to reshape what we study, how we conduct research, what we build, and what it means to know something anthropologically.

Against this backdrop, this essay examines the dual reality of continuity and rupture. From a US perspective, AI has reached a fever pitch, evidenced by the pace at which organizations are integrating AI across functions

(Vogel 2026; Mack 2026), the scale of investment reshaping business infrastructure, and the speed at which these changes are outpacing both governance frameworks and disciplinary responses. Yet, the theoretical and methodological foundations that have long defined business anthropology are not rendered obsolete by this transformation. On the contrary, they are precisely what equips anthropologists to navigate it. To do so, I first recap the digital turn's advances in business anthropology since 2023, and then I examine how the agentic turn both extends and departs from this foundation. Finally, I consider potential futures for business anthropology in this emerging landscape, while raising deeper structural questions about ethnographic knowing that warrant sustained future treatment beyond the scope of this essay.

CONTINUITY: ENDURING FOUNDATIONS

The case for continuity rests on a set of established practices and theoretical foundations that AI does not displace. Organizations adopting AI systems face challenges familiar from earlier digital transformation waves: cultural inertia that outpaces technological change, misalignment between human motivations and technical systems, and the need for ethnographic insight to uncover how technologies take shape in organizational practice (for instance, Hill and Moussa 2022; Hill 2023). The demands for strategy, leadership, and change management that characterized organizations' responses to cloud, social, and mobile technologies apply equally to AI adoption (Hoque, Davenport, and Nelson 2025). From this perspective, business anthropologists can draw on established expertise in organizational culture (for instance, Briody 2016, 2014), design (for instance, Miller and Hitch 2018; Gregory 2018; Wasson et al. 2018), product development (for instance, Artz 2024; Forsythe 1993a), and computational methods (for instance, Artz 2025a; Pedersen 2023) to navigate AI's integration into business contexts.

Indeed, in many respects, AI adoption represents business as usual for business anthropologists. The reason is structural. The fundamental work of digital transformation has always been interpreting the human dimensions of technological change, and that work does not change when the technology does. Those working in organizational, design, marketing, advertising, or consumer research roles continue to perform familiar activities: studying how people interact with technology, identifying barriers to adoption, understand-

ing cultural dynamics that enable or constrain technological change, and helping organizations implement new systems successfully. While AI adds another technology to this portfolio, the interpretive demand placed on organizations is one that business anthropologists have navigated before.

This continuity also draws on a more pointed anthropological tradition of studying computational systems and AI. Historical work by anthropologists such as Lucy Suchman (1987) and Diana Forsythe (1993b) established how computational systems embody the social contexts of their creation and use, revealing that what engineers treat as formal, stable knowledge is actually contingent and shaped by specific situated cultural perspectives. The more recent critical data and algorithmic perspectives developed over the past decade provide additional groundwork for making sense of AI in the current organizational context. Scholars such as Nick Seaver (2022, 2019, 2018a, 2018b) have built on these early foundations to demonstrate that algorithms, such as recommender systems, are culturally situated rather than merely technical objects, actively shaping user engagement patterns while remaining inseparable from their social contexts.

These theoretical insights translate directly into methodological practice. Practitioners who have kept pace with the digital turn in business anthropology find themselves well-positioned for the AI era. Those already skilled at combining ethnographic observation with computational analysis, "zigzagging" between qualitative and quantitative approaches and between digital and traditional methods (Jensen 2024; Munk 2019), possess precisely the hybrid capabilities that AI-era research demands. My own work examining recommender systems from a design and equity perspective illustrates this directly, analyzing how different types of capital (economic, social, and cultural) shape algorithmic bias and visibility in multisided digital markets (Artz 2024, 2022) and demonstrating how anthropological frameworks can actively shape algorithmic system design to address structural inequalities. Thus, for business anthropologists who have embraced data science (Paff 2022) and learned computational methods, such as text and network analysis, over the past decade, current AI tools extend rather than replace their existing toolkit.

The field is not merely asserting these foundations, but acting on them. This themed issue represents one manifestation of a broader institutional mobilization within US business anthropology. My recent co-edited volume, *Anthropology and AI*, brings together practitioners and scholars

grappling with AI's implications for the discipline. Similarly, the 2025 Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC) selected "intelligences" as its organizing theme (EPIC 2025), signaling the elevated importance of computation in applied practice. Perhaps most tellingly, the National Science Foundation has funded a workforce development initiative (NSF Award #2538588) to address critical gaps in America's AI innovation capacity, providing skills development and mentorship networks for anthropologists interested in AI-related roles, with training planned around the Society for Applied Anthropology's 2026 annual meeting. Together, these developments reflect a field mobilizing around its existing strengths.

Nevertheless, agentic AI is arguably not simply another step in that current trajectory. Unlike the less operationally autonomous tools that the field has begun organizing around, agentic systems can initiate action, pursue goals, and participate in the research process itself. Whether existing theory, method, and practice remain sufficient for that shift, or whether the agentic turn requires developing new ones, is the rupture to which this essay now turns.

Rupture: The Agentic Turn

Agentic AI refers to systems that move beyond the reactive, prompt-and-respond pattern that characterizes conversational AI chatbots, which have come to dominate the attention of consumers, organizations, and authors in this volume (for instance, Morais 2026). While impressive in their capabilities, these tools remain largely reactive, requiring users to prompt each action and guide each analytical step through ongoing dialogue. Agentic architectures diverge from this pattern by building on large language model (LLM) foundations with reasoning frameworks, tool access capabilities, persistent memory systems, and planning capabilities that enable extended autonomous operation. These systems can plan multi-step workflows, execute tasks using external tools, adapt their approach based on intermediate results, and maintain context across sustained interactions, transforming computational assistance from human-directed conversation into proactive collaboration capable of sustained, goal-directed reasoning across complex tasks that unfold over extended periods (Artz 2026a, 2026d; Schneider 2025; Murugesan 2025).

The implications for business anthropology become clearer when we consider what these agentic systems might accomplish. Rather than simply processing data when prompted, the systems could in theory deploy automated digital ethnography (ADE) agents to continuously collect, analyze, and interpret unstructured data across digital field sites. They could conduct multimodal analysis of text, images, audio, and video at scales prohibitively time-consuming for human researchers, identify emergent behavioral and cultural patterns in real time, and generate strategic recommendations, all without the involvement of insights professionals, including business anthropologists (Artz 2023b).

This scenario, while still somewhat aspirational, represents more than speculative futures. Many of these capabilities already exist in early forms, including OpenAI and Google's deep research systems, as well as specialized frameworks like the AI Anthropology Toolkit (Artz 2025a). While technical limitations and implementation challenges persist, organizational investment in agentic systems continues to accelerate, and the trajectory towards more autonomous systems appears highly probable, even if the timeline remains unclear. If and when agentic systems can autonomously execute research workflows, analyzing ethnographic data, identifying patterns, and generating strategic recommendations without human guidance, the distinction between anthropological insight and computational approaches to cultural analysis (Sunderland and Denny 2007) may become operationally less relevant to many organizations, particularly those where "good enough" research suffices for rapid iteration cycles. Our response to this plausible future cannot rest solely on claims of interpretive superiority, particularly when decision makers prioritize speed and cost efficiency over analytical depth.

Yet, the most consequential questions that the agentic turn raises concern not just how the field should respond, but what anthropological knowing and doing consist of if or when systems can pursue interpretive goals autonomously across entire workflows rather than serving as discrete tools operated by a human. If agentic systems can meaningfully participate in interpretation by adjudicating between analytical outputs, identifying pattern divergence, and generating interpretive alternatives, then the locus of anthropological knowing and doing becomes genuinely uncertain. Whether anthropological knowing and doing continue to be organized primarily around the judgment and practice of the human researcher, or are taking shape through a novel

sociotechnical configuration of human judgment, agentic systems, data infrastructures, and institutional accountabilities, is a question that this essay raises but cannot yet resolve. The empirical and conceptual base to answer it does not yet exist in sufficient form, and it cannot be developed from the outside. It can only be built through sustained engagement with agentic systems as they develop.

That said, as a business anthropologist building custom agentic systems on a daily basis, my experience points to a genuine rupture. When these systems are built with anthropological sensibilities rather than adapted from off-the-shelf solutions, what becomes possible is qualitatively different from what the tools of 2023 allowed. That difference is precisely why engagement at this moment matters.

Engaging the Agentic Turn

Proactive engagement matters most during formative periods when the design choices shaping a technology's trajectory are still being made. Ruptures create possibilities for reimagining practice, and the rapid organizational adoption of AI alongside the emergence of increasingly autonomous systems creates concrete opportunities to do exactly that. Those opportunities span multiple fronts. Business anthropologists can influence how these technologies develop and are deployed, shape governance frameworks, and ensure that computational approaches to cultural analysis maintain anthropological commitments to context, complexity, and interpretive depth.

AI Anthropology (Artz 2026a, 2026b) provides theoretical resources well suited to this moment, precisely because the conditions agentic AI introduces, among them situated knowledge, distributed agency, and dislocated accountabilities, are ones that the discipline has been theorizing for decades. Anthropology and STS scholars such as Forsythe (1993a, 1993b) and Donna Haraway (1988) established the critical foundation, demonstrating how supposedly objective computational logics actually embody the social worlds and power relations of their creators. From this foundation, the relational tradition extends the analysis further. Bruno Latour's actor network theory (2005) demonstrates how agency arises through networks of human and nonhuman actors rather than residing in discrete components, challenging assumptions

that either humans or machines act independently. Suchman (1998) extends this relational orientation by treating machine agency not as an inherent property of autonomous systems, but as something attributed and stabilized within situated human-machine arrangements. Her analysis of the boundary work between categories such as human and machine, social and technical, clarifies why agentic systems' apparent independence still depends on often-obscured work of coordination, interpretation, repair, and accountability. David Widder and Dawn Nafus' (2023) work on dislocated accountabilities adds another dimension by showing how modular AI supply chains allow responsibility for harm to be displaced across developers, organizations, and end-use contexts, underscoring the need for governance frameworks that locate obligations within specific sociotechnical relations as agentic systems become more autonomous.

Building on these foundations, my own work on co-becoming explores how human-AI relationships unfold as processes of mutual transformation, where neither humans nor AI systems remain unchanged by their encounters (Artz 2026c). In the agentic context, co-becoming takes on concrete form. As agents accumulate memory across interactions, they improve at the tasks researchers direct them towards. Simultaneously, researchers develop greater facility in configuring, managing, prompting, and adjudicating agentic outputs. The relationship is not static, but compounding, each engagement building on and amplifying what came before.

For business anthropologists navigating the agentic turn, this perspective reframes AI adoption not as implementing static tools but as entering into ongoing relationships that reshape both organizational practice and the systems themselves. This relational approach aligns with the human-centered AI principles articulated by Ben Shneiderman (2022), who proposes that automation and human control need not be mutually exclusive, but can be simultaneously maximized to achieve better outcomes – a model supported by the empirical evidence that human-AI partnerships consistently outperform either humans or AI working independently (Brynjolfsson, Li, and Raymond 2025; Dell'Acqua et al. 2023).

Anthropologists can translate these theoretical insights into practice by building purpose-built computational tools that operationalize concepts of distributed agency, mutual constitution, and co-becoming. Rather than adapt generic AI systems to anthropological work, custom-built tools can embed

anthropological sensibilities into their design while positioning human-in-the-loop checkpoints at stages where interpretive judgment proves essential. My development of the AI Anthropology Toolkit (Artz 2025a) exemplifies this approach, operationalizing concepts from my earlier predictions about automated digital ethnography and multimodal analysis (Artz 2023b) through specialized agents for qualitative codebook generation, interview transcript preparation, and coding and thematic analysis. These agents are intentionally designed to require human direction and validation at each stage, making visible the coordination work between human and computational capabilities that claims of autonomous machine agency often obscure. The coding agent demonstrates this collaborative model most directly, enabling researchers to configure different theoretical perspectives and apply them systematically to the same dataset across separate analytical runs, generating multiple interpretations that researchers must then navigate, synthesize, and defend rather than flattening analytical complexity by seeking singular explanations. The design logic behind this approach, including why these agents are built to sustain rather than resolve interpretive friction, is what makes the researcher's role as adjudicator the analytical core of multi-agent ethnography (Artz 2026d).

Yet, that adjudicating role raises a question that practice alone cannot yet resolve. When a researcher directs parallel agents configured to competing theoretical orientations, adjudicates their outputs, and integrates what they surface into an analysis that none of them could have produced independently, the question of where anthropological knowledge is being produced becomes genuinely difficult to answer. The theoretical frameworks assembled in this section – distributed agency, mutual constitution, dislocated accountabilities, and co-becoming – provide essential resources for thinking about that configuration, but they were developed before modern agentic systems existed as consequential actors within research assemblages. Whether they are sufficient for what the agentic turn introduces, or whether the field will need to develop new theoretical language for a research process that is neither fully human nor fully computational, is a question that this essay raises but leaves open, so the field can respond collectively, with the full range of theoretical and empirical resources that it is only beginning to develop.

CONCLUSION

This essay has traced how business anthropology faces a dual reality of continuity and rupture. The continuity manifests in two ways: the digital turn's establishment as disciplinary reality and the enduring relevance of decades of anthropological theory, method, and practice. But rupture accompanies this continuity. While current AI chatbots primarily augment human capabilities, emerging agentic systems introduce conditions that existing foundations alone may not be equipped to address, raising questions about what anthropological knowing and doing consist of when systems are able to participate in interpretation autonomously rather than serving as discrete tools a human operates.

The transformation in my own computational practice, from adapting general-purpose tools to building systems grounded in anthropological sensibilities, illustrates this dual reality. The AI Anthropology Toolkit, operationalized through multi-agent ethnography (Artz 2025a, 2026d), demonstrates one approach to designing computational systems that center human judgment while making visible the coordination work that claims of machine autonomy often obscure. Whether the conceptual and methodological resources assembled here are sufficient for what the agentic turn introduces, or whether business anthropology will need new theoretical language and methods for emergent research assemblages and sociotechnical practices, is a question that the field must pursue collectively and from inside the practice. How business anthropologist engage the agentic turn will shape both what the discipline becomes and what these systems become through sustained encounter with anthropological practice.

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