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**Taylor R. Genovese**

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# Going Gonzo: Toward a Performative Practice in Multimodal Ethnography

Taylor R. Genovese

## Abstract

In an unconventional anthropological provocation that fuses (visual) narrative with analysis, this article discusses the ways in which living history as a playfully performative—but intellectually and materially rigorous—hobby can entangle with multimodal anthropology in ways that produce mutually beneficial embodied practices. Pulling from performance theory and Flyvbjerg's (2001) theorization of a phronetic social science, it is argued that anthropologists should adopt an external performative practice in addition to conducting ethnographic research. By doing so, it allows anthropologists to deal with the uncertainty and vicissitudes of ethnographic fieldwork while cultivating a rewarding external performative practice. Likewise, an anthropologist's chosen external performative practice helps to build confidence and develop extra-ethnographic skillsets for one's primary research. However, this approach carries with it political and ethical pitfalls; namely, the risk of losing sight of one's positionality as a researcher. Through an infusion of concepts like ethnographic refusal and anti-hegemonic phronesis, multimodal ethnography, and its partnered external performative practice(s), can become modes for equity, liberation, and justice.



*The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew.*  
—Abraham Lincoln

*I'm sitting in our hotel room on the second floor of an apartment building on Calle Gran Vía de Colón in Granada, a city in the Andalusia region of southern Spain. I have a bandana wrapped around my head à la David Foster Wallace and I'm listening as the putters of scooters at the streetlight below morph into screaming whines the moment the light turns green. It's noisy—almost overwhelmingly noisy—but the cool breeze floats through our open window and it feels good after a day of traveling through the scorching mid-May sun. The hot days are a not-so-subtle reminder that we are only 300 kilometers away from North Africa. I lean back in my chair, take a sip of Fanta limón, close my eyes, and let the traffic noise slowly wash over me until my mind vibrates at the same rate as a 50cc Vespa.*  
—Author's Diary, May 23, 2016



*Figure 1: The author as a brigadista americano.*





My honeymoon in Granada seems far away as I trudge toward camp in San Pedro, a community teetering on the southern coast of Los Angeles and the neighborhood Charles Bukowski decided to call home. There's a heatwave this weekend—the only thing that reminds me of Spain—and the temperature is set to rise above 100°F (~38°C). My feet clap against the sidewalk, the rubber soles of my *alpargatas*—the traditional rope sandals of Spain—make an amusing flesh-slapping sound on the cement. A haversack is slung across my body, digging into my shoulder. It's loaded with canned sardines, spare socks, a full canteen, a canteen cup, two candles, a notebook, a pencil, and a 1932 edition of Lenin's *State and Revolution*. On my other shoulder is slung my rifle, a Mosin-Nagant M91 that is nine pounds of solid wood and metal. My rolled wool blanket is draped over my haversack shoulder and it bounces against the leather ammunition box secured to my belt. For this weekend, I'm attempting to portray a member of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion (ALB), the predominantly American volunteer fighting force attached to the International Brigades that fought for Republican Spain against Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39. I am also participating in this living history event as an anthropologist.

The small academic field of reenactment studies (Anderson 1984; McCalman and Pickering, 2010; for an excellent annotated bibliography, see: Putman, 2016) has a rather long history, but due to its transdisciplinary nature, it is not very well known—with research on living history being splintered throughout a landscape of discipline-specific journals. Most reenactment research has relied, at least in part, on an ethnographic component—how else can one talk about such an embodied practice? However, most of these projects rely on the classic ethnographic dynamic between the researcher and the Other. That is, the researcher conducts, through participant-observation, research on and about the Other, then returns to their university in order to write about Them (Bernard 2006). In this article, I will be describing my (performative) gonzo ethnographic approach to reenactment studies in which I not only blur the line between researcher and interlocutor, but I also encourage the two to absorb one another, like mitosis in reverse. I allow my living history work to inform my anthropological method and theoretical background while simultaneously bringing my anthropological work into my living history interpreting. I make no presumption that intellectual or ethnographic distance is actually possible. Instead, I follow a lineage from gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson to anthropologist Steven Fedorowicz (2013, p. 68) who encourages fellow gonzo anthropologists to “get high from the performance of ethnography itself.” Consequently, I take seriously Victor Turner's (1982, p. 89) exhortation that anthropologists “should not merely read and comment on ethnographies, but actually perform them.” These theoretical concepts lead me to pursue the playful, but intellectually and materially rigorous hobby of living history in order to engage with it as a joint practice to ethnography—or, as a kind of hacking of the Aristotelian notion of “phronesis,” an applied, active wisdom that is set apart from analytical knowledge (*episteme*) and technical knowledge (*techne*) by taking seriously the social and the political (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Furthermore, both ethnography and living history are scenarios that operate as “acts of transfer,” (Taylor, 2003) where what is transferred is some form of meaning making. Diana Taylor (2003, p. 33) discusses the interplay between performance and archival work as “constitut[ing] and transmit[ting] social knowledge...[placing]



spectators within its frame, implicating us in its ethics and politics.” It is within these theoretical frameworks that I couch my arguments for a multimodal gonzo anthropology.

When I refer to “gonzo” throughout this article, I am not making a reference to the famous blue Muppet. The term gonzo is best attributed to the journalist Hunter S. Thompson, who coined his style of writing as “gonzo journalism.” Thompson (2011, p. 69) describes gonzo journalism as a “style of ‘reporting’ based on William Faulkner’s idea that the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism—and the best journalists have always known this. Which is not to say that Fiction is necessarily ‘more true’ than Journalism—or vice versa—but that both ‘fiction’ and ‘journalism’ are artificial categories; and that both forms, at their best, are only two different means to the same end. This is getting pretty heavy...” Shepherding a “gonzo” approach to the discipline of anthropology and the method of ethnography is not a new development, and so far, its importation has produced a binary set of principles. First, a gonzo approach to ethnography necessitates total immersion, perhaps with the caveat of also leaning toward the “extreme, excessive [and] unorthodox” (Fedorowicz, 2013, p. 57). And second, that this approach “rejects the notion of any privileged vantage point for observation, insists on recognition of the participatory dimension of the researcher’s role, and urges experiments with research methods and reporting practices that can liberate and empower general audiences” (Sefcovic, 1995, p. 21). The gonzo approach carries with it political and ethical pitfalls; in particular, it runs the risk of an ethnographer *over*-identifying with the Other, thereby compromising and losing sight of their positionality as a researcher. In this article, I hope to (humbly) contribute my multimodal anthropological articulation to a gonzo ethnographic approach, as well as discuss the political and ethical considerations of gonzo anthropology.

Before I continue, it is important to make a distinction between the two major types of live historical performances. I have categorized them as: 1) living history, or interpretation and; 2) tactical events, or reenactments. Although there is overlap between the two, the former tends to be for the benefit of the public and (usually) involves multiple time periods set up at a single site, allowing the public to interact with a variety of performers who spend the day(s) engaging with visitors about their specific time period and/or military conflict. The latter are usually held privately and are almost always immersive tactical battles complete with blank ammunition or dulled blades and (usually) last for several days, allowing the reenactor ample time to attempt to tap into what has been referred to as “magic moments” (Stanton, 1997) or “period rushes” (Agnew, 2004). These brief flashes are moments of embodied performance-induced spatial and temporal blurring that allow the reenactor to feel as if they are within the place and time that they are portraying. These pseudo-spiritual experiences are usually followed by periods of difficulty transitioning out of the liminal space between past and present (Agnew, 2004)—what I like to call a *historical hangover*. Cathy Stanton (1997, p. 99) argues that reenactors are aware of these performative and embodied “magic moments” as being “both an imaginative leap and an intention to remain safe, paradoxically remaining grounded in reality while giving oneself over to the illusion.” For the purposes of this article, I will be focusing on my experiences at a living history/interpretation event.<sup>1</sup>





## A Practice of Performance in Living History and Ethnography

“¡Avión!” shouted the *cabo* (Corporal). “¡Cuerpo a tierra!”

The five of us threw ourselves into the dirt as an airplane screamed overhead. It banked sharply in the sky before releasing smoke, demonstrating aerial combat maneuvers to an enraptured audience below. We clutched our rifles to our chests and covered our heads, preparing ourselves for bombs that would never fall. The aircraft had made its entrance mid-sentence as we were discussing The Battle of the Ebro with several members of the public. We picked ourselves up from the dirt, dusted ourselves off, and used the opportunity to discuss Franco’s aerial and artillery bombardment of the position known as Hill 666, a barren stronghold that the ALB was holding during the battle. We did not plan for the airplane to begin its aerial demonstration while talking about the battle, nor did our *cabo* plan to give the command to fall to the ground. Living history and reenacting contain a spirit of improvisation and flair for dramatic performance that naturally weaves into storytelling and teaching in order to engage with an audience. In this way, it is reminiscent of how many anthropologists pedagogically approach the task of teaching ethnographic methods to students.



Figure 2: Part of the ALB unit illustrating Spanish Civil War tactics for storming an elevated position (doctored).

Like some anthropologists, most living historians tend to express an unnecessary aversion to naming what they do a “performance” because this label, they believe, makes them sound somehow unprofessional or fictitious (Mateer, 2006). However, both endeavors require what Mads Daugbjerg (2014, p.729) has called “patchworking”—that is, combining “bits and pieces” of material culture and knowledge within a



performative context. For living historians, argues Daugbjerg (2014), this contributes to a holistic sensory experience of history (when compared to reading) while embracing the unfinished nature of historical narratives—this fragmentary engagement with history, he states, lies at the heart of reenacting’s appeal. Living history has the potential to democratize and decolonize history—to expand historiography beyond the realm of the elite, educated, rational (white, male) subject—by transcending from the archive as the chief site of historical engagement and embracing performance as a legitimate method. For anthropologists engaged in ethnography, this should sound familiar. As (Western) anthropologists, we are also engaged in a practice of patchworking—combining “bits and pieces” of material culture and knowledge while engaged in the performative sensory experience of ethnography. Like history to living historians (Agnew, 2007), ethnography is an unfinished narrative of the communities with which we are engaged. The practice of living history and anthropology are dramaturgical and performative (Denzin, 2003)—neither practice should shy away from these descriptors.

Every day, we are presenting ourselves as an exhibition—particularly while under the hegemony of a branding-obsessed late capitalism—and the performance of ethnography is no different. This is what Erving Goffman (1959) referred to as the “presentation of self in everyday life” and this performance is traced through the entire process of ethnography, from the methods to the discourse (Fedorowicz, 2013). The ethnographer, like the living historian, “is an actor, director, recorder of events, writer, artist and audience all in one” (Fedorowicz, 2013, p. 55). With this in mind, the utilization of theatrical practitioner and theorist Konstantin Stanislavski’s “system”—better known as “method acting”—may assist in creating ethnographic openings for both anthropologists and living historians. Stanislavski’s (2008) system is built upon the “art of experiencing” in which a performer uses their conscious thought and willpower to indirectly manifest subconscious behaviors and emotional experiences from their own past in order to present a realistic performance. On an individual level, prior to my participation in the ALB living history event, I re-read my diary entries written when my partner and I were traveling through Spain. Partially thanks to the heat wave, I was able to recall the warmth of southern Spain, the smells of the earth, the sounds of the people, the feel of a train rocking on the tracks, the way the wind can entice all of the senses. I was then able to use these past experiences to bolster my living history interpreting. On a collective level, our reenacting group would shift between instructing the public about the war and acting out improvised scenarios for them—reminiscent of Stanislavski’s inner/outer theatrical sense of self, an oscillation between experience and embodiment. This shimmering between the inner/outer sense of selves while practicing living history is analogous to the emic/etic ethnographic duality. In this way, the ethnographic manipulation of Stanislavski’s “system”—and the cultivation of an external performative practice (in this case, living history)—can become an instrument within an anthropological researcher’s “toolkit of concepts” (Rabinow, 2003, p. 2).





Figure 3: A different kind of tool kit—a small sampling of what a *brigadista* might have carried during the Spanish Civil War.

For the multimodal gonzo anthropologist, these conceptual and performative tools reside within a phronetic toolbox. In his 2001 book *Making Social Science Matter*, Bent Flyvbjerg infuses Aristotle's conception of phronesis—or "practical wisdom"—with Foucault's analytics of power. According to Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 60), the "principal objective for social science with a phronetic approach is to carry out analyses and interpretations of the status of values and interests in society aimed at social commentary and social action, i.e. praxis." In order to do this, according to Flyvbjerg, researchers must immerse themselves in their craft (i.e. conducting ethnography) with an eye toward illuminating uneven power dynamics. However, Flyvbjerg (2001) continues by arguing that a key practice in social science phronetics is that while a researcher is not conducting fieldwork, they should be reading detailed case studies (i.e. ethnographies) from other researchers in order to vicariously develop their expertise. It is this final aspect of Flyvbjerg's phronesis that I would like to transmute into a *gonzo phronetics*.

Ironically, a gonzo phronetics hacks Flyvbjerg's conception of the term by shifting the partnered external performative practice from an epistemic practice (reading case studies/ethnographies) to a phronetic practice (embodied performance). This does not mean that an anthropologist should stop reading ethnographies, nor does this mean an anthropologist's chosen external performative practice (in this case, living history) is meant to replace the important learning processes of conducting ethnographic research. Instead, ethnography and living history are mirrored domains of experience





in which the act of “being there” provides for unique dialogic ambiguities and openings that help trace the self to the collective within historical, individual, and cultural contexts (Taylor, 2003). Each mode of performance operates as a method of transmitting selective histories and as embodied “acts of transfer” that make new political arguments and forge cultural identities (Taylor, 2003). Cultivating the synergistic practice of gonzo phronetics allows anthropologists to deal with the uncertainty and vicissitudes of ethnographic fieldwork while cultivating a rewarding external performative practice; and the ambiguity and disruptive fluctuations that arise in one’s external performative practice likewise provides important lessons when confronted with vital, but sometimes uncomfortable, ethnographic challenges during fieldwork. Furthermore, by engaging in an explicitly performative practice(s), a gonzo phronetics begins to break down the contrived division between “serious scholarship” and creative pursuits. It takes seriously a variety of knowledge practices, disrupting the established positivist, Western conception of what exactly scholarship, learning, knowledge, dissemination, etc. can and should be. In this way, it is similar to the effect Hunter S. Thompson had on blurring the lines between journalism and fiction. The ideal gonzo approach to phronesis becomes a performative practice of constructing one’s sense of self in service to research that produces social commentary and, more importantly, equitable social and political action (praxis).



*Figure 4: Republican Spain was supplied with arms from only two countries: the Soviet Union and Mexico. Other than Spanish weaponry, Russian Mosin-Nagant rifles were the most popular among *brigadistas*.*



## Political and Ethical Considerations of Gonzo Anthropology

“¡Escuadra!” shouts Commissar Mateo. “¡Firmes!”

The order to attention is met with groans as we emerge from underneath the cramped lean-to and into the oppressive heat of the sun. I pound my spent pipe against the underside of my sandal and slip it gently into my haversack before securing the top button of my shirt, forming up with the rest of the squad. “In thirty minutes, we will begin our political lecture for the day,” says Mateo. “Get some water and meet back here before the hour. Dismissed!” We all shuffle away toward the watering hole—in this case, a hose on the side of a nearby building. I splash my face with water before filling my canteen and head back to sit in the dehydrated grass next to the Commissar. Mateo, who is actually a Ph.D. student in History, spent fifteen minutes pouring over his dog-eared, vintage copy of Marx’s *Das Kapital* and my copy of Lenin’s *State and Revolution* while jotting down quotes as well as notes to himself from his own fieldwork in Spain. He then hauled his 1930s typewriter on top of an overturned apple crate and began to hammer down on the keys—the machine-gun mechanical *chonk-thwap* sound of the typebars slamming into the paper resonated in the hot, dense air. This sound alone was enough to draw children and teenagers, who had not seen a physical typewriter before; it also attracted adults, who were drawn to the sonic nostalgia. After typing a page, Mateo launched into his detailed lecture on Spanish history and political economy, as well as the changing landscape of industry and the plight of the Spanish proletariat. After finishing, he asked if there were any questions. With some members of the public watching this performative interpreting session, our *cabo* asked why we should, as Americans, care about what was happening to the Spanish. Our Commissar went on to explain the importance of international solidarity and the danger fascism places on a global population—ideas that surely resonate within Trump’s America. Several members of the public nodded their heads along, some looked on with apathy or even reactionary disgust, and others explained to their children what fascism was and why it needed to be defeated.

This intervention, which took place in a fairly simple performative space, drew on a gonzo phronetic approach and fostered political discourse in an environment that usually eschews these important historical narratives. However, gonzo phronetics, as a core component of gonzo anthropology, runs the risk of reproducing damaging, regressive traumas within the field of anthropology. For example: what happens if a (white) gonzo anthropologist feels that they alone can speak for marginalized communities? Might it only lead to the deployment of violence under the guise of analysis (Parikh, 2018)? And does this not also feed into the myth that marginalized communities only exist to be researched? Relatedly, does it not also perpetuate the violence of treating colleagues from marginalized communities as if they are just interlocutors and not researchers in their own right (Martin, 2017)? To prevent replicating the past abuses of anthropology, the gonzo approach needs to be tempered with self-reflexive ethnographic conceptions of refusal (Simpson 2007; 2016) and what William Paul Simmons (2012, p. 247) calls “anti-hegemonic phronetics” in order to operate in an ethical and politically productive





*Image 5:* A portrait of Commissar Mateo (as indicated by the 'C' on his cap) in our encampment at San Pedro. As is not the case with Mateo, some ALB *brigadistas* [according to Alvah Bessie (1954)] would sometimes tease their Commissars, particularly if they were not well liked, by calling them “comic stars,” a spoof on their title.

manner. In this respect, a gonzo approach continues the ongoing struggle to “unsettle” anthropology (Manuel and Derrickson, 2015; Powis and Martin, 2018).

It is important to acknowledge the fact that North Atlantic Anthropology exists on the bedrock of colonialism and its genealogy of abuse continues into the present. By taking such an unorthodox approach to ethnographic work, one runs the risk—as white anthropologists especially—of becoming uncritically subsumed within the hegemony of anthropology’s inherent coloniality. However, by proactively refusing to serve colonial interests, gonzo phronetics might operate safely within an ethical framework. Audra Simpson (2016, p. 330) calls this kind of refusal the “revenge of consent,” not in the sense of individualized harm in order to render justice, but rather “avenging a prior injustice and pointing to its ongoing life in the present.” Refusal implies a closure or stoppage, but the act of refusal also generates new openings, new possibilities. A conscious, steadfast refusal to ignore the colonial legacy of anthropological practice does not create an impenetrable wall; rather, it produces an explosion of possibilities—what Cary Wolfe (2010, p. 15) has described as “openness from closure.” Furthermore, as Simmons (2012, p. 247) points out: “since our academic knowledge is infused with hegemonic power structures, phronetic social scientists must work with



marginalized communities to call into question academic knowledge itself through the co-generation of new knowledge.” In other words, a gonzo approach must use any privilege afforded to the researcher to listen to marginalized communities—to “suspend our own voices in humility (Simmons, 2012, p. 254)—and to lend any possessed privilege to the destruction of injustices illuminated by one’s performative practice.

To assist in achieving this goal, Flyvbjerg (2004, p. 400) outlines a set of four questions one should ask when taking a phronetic approach:

- 1.) Where are we going?
- 2.) Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?
- 3.) Is this development desirable?
- 4.) What if anything should we do about it?

Simmons (2012, p. 261), taking an anti-hegemonic approach, adds three additional questions:

- 1.) Who is *aneu logou* (without a voice; Aristotle’s term) in the political community?
- 2.) What does it mean to speak for the Other?
- 3.) Are our attempts at empowerment actually perpetuating the hegemonic discourse?

To round these out to ten, I would like to propose an additional three questions that should be asked when taking a gonzo phronetic approach:

- 1.) From which context of emergence(s) (colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, racism, etc.) does our performative practice(s) emerge and how might we subvert them?
- 2.) How can our practice(s) legitimize multimodality as an alternative to positivist, linear modes of learning, teaching, and disseminating knowledge?
- 3.) In what ways does my practice(s) respectfully boost marginalized voices?

## Conclusion

By way of a brief conclusion, it is important for me to disclose that I view this as a working paper and an early conceptualization for how to engage—in a performative, gonzo way—with multimodal anthropology. Living history research is distinct and secondary to my dissertation work but, as an ancillary performative practice, it is deeply entangled and embedded within my ethics, methods, and ontology as a researcher, an activist anthropologist, a living historian, an artist, and a human being. The performative nature of gonzo phronetics, as a practice that is both individualistic





and collective, ascetic and sybaritic, has produced fruitful and previously unseen openings in my work and I believe that these benefits are replicable. The gonzo approach has also illuminated analytic and activist modes within my research, clarifying the benefits of listening more and using my privileges to combat disciplinary and societal injustices. My hope is that with the (most) recent multimodal turn in anthropology, we can continue to topple disciplinary barriers in order to situate trans-disciplinary practices that are beneficial to ourselves, our communities, and our planet.

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I would like to dedicate this article to the memory of all the men and women of the ALB, International Brigades, and the Popular Army of the Second Spanish Republic; in particular, Kenneth Graeber—father to my committee member David Graeber—who went to Spain from June 1937 to December 1938 to fight against the fascists and who passed away in 1996. May his memory be a blessing.



## Notes

[1] As a brief disclaimer: reenacting is a highly subjective and communal occurrence. The experiences that I describe herein have everything to do with the people that I perform with, the time period we interpret, and the unit that we portray—dynamics and political leanings/objectives would be vastly different in, say, groups portraying a German unit during World War II, a Confederate unit during the U.S. Civil War, or an American unit during World War I. There remains the (sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit) glorification of racial and colonial realities of the past that certain reenactment groups leverage to reify white supremacist and/or ethno-nationalist positions through their performances. Similarly, the glorification of war and toxic masculinity tend to express themselves widely in living history/reenactment events. Although these are incredibly important problems faced by the reenactment community, a thorough discussion of them lies outside of the purview of this article.

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**Taylor R. Genovese** is a doctoral student at Arizona State University. He has a BA and an MA in Anthropology and is interested in radical (techno)politics, social imaginaries, utopian futures, and multimodal ethnography. His dissertation work focuses on producing a genealogy of futurist discourse surrounding human immortality and space travel by tracing the legacy of these ideas from the Proletkult and Russian Cosmist movements. He is interested in the ways in which utopian ideas rooted in human solidarity get transmuted into the egocentric dreams of the wealthy through declensionist narratives. Taylor can be contacted at: [taylor.genovese@asu.edu](mailto:taylor.genovese@asu.edu). [ORCID: 0000-0003-0102-6467](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0102-6467) Twitter: [@trgenovese](https://twitter.com/trgenovese)