

(<http://www.beyondacademia.org/>)



Interview with LiAnne Yu, Anthropology PhD, on a varied career as an ethnographer

by *Monica Gates*, blogger for *Beyond Academia* (<http://www.beyondacademia.org/>)

[LiAnne Yu \(https://lianneyu.com/\)](https://lianneyu.com/), Anthropology PhD, leads a compelling career. Her work branches in three directions: *ethnography*, *design research*, and *narrative journalism*, three fields she ties together with anthropology. Curious about each of these fields and how Dr. Yu weaves them together, I contacted her for an interview. What follows is a fascinating description of a multi-career journey. (http://www.beyondacademia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/lianne-yu-headshot_fluxible-1.jpg)

—

“What is your job? It seems like you have it divided into three components (ethnography, design research, and narrative journalism), but you say you’re an anthropologist at heart?”

“I work for myself, and that’s the core of why I can do a couple of different things. I am an anthropologist at heart; I have a PhD in Anthropology and kind of everything I do is, fortunately or



not, informed by my background as an anthropologist. Meaning that I always bring a cultural lens to what I'm doing. Part of my work is based in ethnography or ethnographic-like processes— those are deep-dive and immersive. I worked for many years as a UX [user experience] researcher. What that means is that I consulted for companies, mainly tech companies, on how to better understand their customers using ethnography. I still continue to do that as a freelancer. I guess you could say that's my bread and butter profession. That's what pays the bills and is my professional identity, but I also work as a freelance writer as well, doing various forms of magazine writing and narrative journalism, which I'm learning over the years. It's not that different from my other kinds of professional work in that I'm using a lot of the same techniques around ethnography: getting to know people, immersing myself in a culture or a community or a topic and somehow bringing it to life for an audience. Those are the different things I do. More broadly, I'm also a writer and I write fiction and nonfiction.”

“Could you tell me more about what ethnography is in general?”

“Ethnography is the study of societies and cultures and communities through the use of a technique which is essentially living amongst and within the community itself. Coming in, spending time in a community. Academic, traditional anthropologists often live for months or years in a community. It can be in the same country, or more traditionally it's another country foreign to them. Through living there, they start to understand what the rules and norms are of that society, both as an outsider but also increasingly as an insider. What makes up the culture, what makes up the cultural norms, how families are defined, how gender relationships are defined, religion, politics, so on and so forth. How society comes together or not. The norms and the expectations as well as the different ways people break those norms and rebel.

“Essentially, that's what anthropologists do through the technique of ethnography, which is also used by sociologists and other people in social sciences. That's the main tool kit. Within ethnography, there are different techniques. The most notable one is what we call participant observation, which is participating alongside rituals or everyday activities in the community that you're studying. Both participating to do it as well as observing— stepping back and trying to understand what's going on, in a way that people who are inside of the culture may not be able to explain because they take it for granted. We take for granted all the everyday norms that we have. An ethnographer comes in and makes those things explicit.”

“That sounds like a really cool field, and also a very academic field. You seem to have made a living from it— I suspect that's unusual or hard to do.”

“To make a living from it outside of academia? Actually, no. In the field of user research in consulting for companies, there are actually a lot of ethnographers. Some very famous anthropologists as well, who paved the way for folks like myself to work in the field. A lot of people with anthropology or sociology or general social science backgrounds who do very similar kinds of research have found a place in professional consulting, and working with companies in their market research or their design research. That's not to say it's easy to do or to get one of these jobs, but I do

find that there is a good representation of folks with backgrounds like myself working professionally, I hope doing well and happy.”

“Backgrounds like yourself, that means PhDs in anthropology or social sciences?”

“Yes. Speaking more narrowly, there are definitely a whole host of anthropology PhDs who work in my field: a lot of people with Masters, or some background in anthropology. I think a lot of people who go for the PhD, myself included, get into a PhD program with the expectation that we’re going to work in academia— for social scientists, this is why you get a PhD. But somewhere along the way, PhD students, and I’ll just speak for myself, find that the academy isn’t exactly what we thought it would be. Jobs are actually very limited and hard to come by. Social science professors are notorious for teaching forever and never dying! Positions open up once in a blue moon, and if you don’t want to live somewhere random, it can be difficult for people looking at an academic lifestyle. For myself, I realized that what I love most about anthropology was the aspects of field work. Doing ethnography in the field, learning about people. I’m always exploring new things, and I realized that an academic lifestyle was not actually a good fit for what I wanted.

“Going into the professional field where every couple of months I’m doing something new, sometimes completely new and outside of anything I’m familiar with, became a really good fit for me. It’s a better match for my passion for ethnography and my passion for doing field work and exploring new cultures.”

“What’s your day-to-day look like?”

“A typical client project of mine might last three to four months. I’ll give you a concrete example to make it more tangible. I have a client who is a maker of sportswear, one of the big three sportswear makers in the U.S. and globally, and they wanted to better understand the culture of basketball players because they produce basketball shoes. They wanted to really understand the culture of street basketball players. Folks who are very hungry for success, very dedicated, love the sport, but who may not always have the means to buy the most expensive stuff. So as part of this study I and the team—

[**“The team?”**

“When I work with client, the client’s pain is my pain, even though I’m not a full-time employee of the company. It’s important to work together as a team and think of them as my team members.”]

“I and the team embedded ourselves in a community of basketball players in South Chicago. We basically hung out with them, got to know their lifestyles, followed them around, filmed them, watched them, went into their homes, looked at everything, all of their clothes, all of their shoes, spent time understanding their day-to-day lifestyle.

“At the end of this multi-week research, I created a very visual magazine with photos, with stories, with snippets as well as opportunity areas and recommendations for my clients. This isn’t for the

mass public to look at, but for my client team to really get into the everyday lives of these 20-something basketball players. Most of the people on the [client's] team are not able to get into that themselves— they're really busy in their day-to-day jobs at the company. Being able to get into the heads and the lifestyles of these basketball players was something that was really important for them in order to better understand how they should design, what are the opportunity areas that they're missing, what they should be thinking about that would make them special. That would be a typical engagement for me when it comes to using anthropology with my corporate clients.”

“How did you get into your current career? You said you started with design research? What was the path right out of your PhD?”

“I was back from my own fieldwork, which was in Vietnam, writing my dissertation and starting to lightly job hunt, looking around for teaching positions. I got frustrated pretty quickly with what I found there. I was really impatient so I can't say that I did a systematic search: within a month I was impatient. Honestly, I'm probably not a great model because for me it was very serendipitous. I heard through somebody about a job position for someone who spoke Chinese, which I do, and had skill as an anthropologist to help them on a project around mobile phone use. This is early on, like the year 2000, so mobile phones were new and very different than they are today. Essentially somebody wanted to hire an anthropologist to do ethnography in China among mobile phone users. I thought, “Well, that sounds really cool,” and I didn't have a mobile phone then, and I didn't know what design consulting was, I didn't know what designers did, I knew nothing about this whole industry, but I started this job. It was just a short contract position and I found myself in China working alongside designers, going out into the field to interview and understand the culture of early adopters of mobile phones in China.

“And I loved it so much and felt like my skills as an anthropologist were really in full [throttle]. I liken it to being in four wheel drive, able to use all my skills in a very compact and rapid-fire way. Academic research often takes a long time. You're expected to take years to do your research and then years to write it up. One piece of research in academia should last you twenty years. The shelf life is long. But maybe because I maybe have some form of ADD, I love the rapid-fire lifestyle of professional anthropology, and loved that a project was end-to-end within a couple of months and that after I moved on to another topic. Within a year I was doing projects on mobile phone use, I was doing projects on social media, the culture of fast food eaters. That's how I got into the field, and I just never looked back from there.”

“How did you start your writing? Was it all simultaneous with your corporate work?”

“No... the writing came later. Of course, as academics and as professionals we're always writing in one form or another, so it wasn't like I wasn't writing at all. But some years into working, I took a writing class and fell in love with it. When I was much younger, like in my teens, I always imagined myself a writer. I came back to those very early desires— wrote all kinds of fiction and nonfiction. Maybe seven or eight years back, I decided I wanted to do something more with my writing rather than just fool around with it. I'm a strong believer in the idea that every person can and should have

the right to have many or multiple careers in their lifetime. It doesn't have to be a straight line or a highway leading to the inevitable requirement from one job. Because I freelanced and worked for myself with my design research, that gave me the freedom to also explore writing.

“Since I'm part-time in Hawaii, I write regularly for Hawaii Business Magazine. I do in-depth features. I recently completed a fairly long piece on climate change in Hawaii and how it impacts the state. I also did an article a couple months back on opioid use in Hawaii. It's the same and it's different in a way compared to my other research. I'm using many of the same skills; I'm spending time with communities, getting to know their issues. But I'm writing and able to reach a way broader audience through my journalism. So the responsibilities are different.”

“Interesting. You got into narrative journalism later, which presumably means you used your earlier experience with design research to sell yourself and get a foot in the door for that?”

“No, to be honest— at least when I started, there was no overlap. My professional experience didn't give me any bearing or give me a step up in any way in narrative journalism. Essentially I did what any new writer or magazine hopeful did; I submitted pitches to different editors. Having said that, my confidence and my ability to express myself came from my professional work, so I was probably a much more confident pitcher of stories than I would've been if I had been younger, if that was my first career. I guess I did bring those skills and abilities into it. But at first I was basically just pitching blind, and then a couple of different places started offering me writing assignments, which I took on. That's where I am with that!”

“You have corporate design research, narrative journalism, and ethnography. How is ethnography separated into a category?”

“I think in general I am an ethnographer. I still have a toehold in the academic world as an ethnographer; I had a book published in 2014 based on ethnography done in China. For all intents and purposes, that was a fairly academic book. I think of myself very fundamentally as an ethnographer too.”

“How's the freelance life in terms of income?”

“I've been very fortunate, actually— I make more as a freelancer than when I was working full time. People ask me how I do it all the time... I feel so ambivalent trying to explain it, because a lot of it for me is serendipity, but I think it's also that I built a solid reputation for myself over the years. All my work is by referral. I don't go out and actively pitch myself or go on sale; I don't do sales at companies or cold call people. It's all referral, word of mouth.

“Plus, being a freelancer, I'm very nimble— I don't have any overhead. I very much embrace a telecommuting kind of lifestyle where my office is wherever my laptop and I are, so I don't have the overhead expenses that I've seen companies, even small companies, have. I don't have to pay out a lot of things that are expensive for a traditional business like an office. For that reason, it's easy for me to take on projects very quickly and integrate into a company very quickly.

“You just have to keep doing good work and letting people know that you’re thinking, and always evolving and growing. I think those are key things for me.”

“You travel a lot— how long are you in one place?”

“I typically have four major projects per year. Each one lasts around three to four months: some of them overlap. When I’m actually traveling for field work, that can be anywhere from one to three weeks in that timeframe. It’s global as much as it is in the U.S.— for example, I’m actually going to Shanghai next week to do research on athletes.”

“What are you favorite and least favorite parts of your job?”

“My least favorite... it’s not my least favorite anymore— I’ve gotten my arms around it after so many years— but you have to be really buttoned up; you have to keep track of everything. I hate Excel spreadsheets and I’ve never liked working with them, but I’m very in depth now. I keep track of all my expenses, making sure that I’m 100% buttoned up. You have to be, working on your own as a freelancer. You have to have all your receipts, know where everything is, have it all completely accessible. I’m a very adept person now when it comes to doing my taxes, but it scared me the first couple of years. I would pay somebody to help me out with it, but that actually scared me more since I didn’t know what was going on. I encourage everyone to take control of their own finances and know exactly what you’re doing and what you’re paying for. It’s painful to do, but it serves you well later on.

“I’m 48 this year. Interestingly, my favorite part of the job is working with people younger than me. I really enjoy that. More and more so now my clients are actually younger than I am, and I enjoy that relationship, where in some way I’m mentoring them but in many ways they’re teaching me. I really love working with millennials, post-millennials.”

Thank you Dr. Yu!



Tweet

[ANTHROPOLOGY \(HTTP://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/TAG/ANTHROPOLOGY/\)](http://www.beyondacademia.org/tag/anthropology/)

[ETHNOGRAPHY \(HTTP://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/TAG/ETHNOGRAPHY/\)](http://www.beyondacademia.org/tag/ethnography/)

[FREELANCE \(HTTP://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/TAG/FREELANCE/\)](http://www.beyondacademia.org/tag/freelance/)

[JOURNALISM \(HTTP://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/TAG/JOURNALISM/\)](http://www.beyondacademia.org/tag/journalism/)

[MULTI-CAREER \(HTTP://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/TAG/MULTI-CAREER/\)](http://www.beyondacademia.org/tag/multi-career/)

[POST-PHD \(HTTP://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/TAG/POST-PHD/\)](http://www.beyondacademia.org/tag/post-phd/)

[SOCIAL SCIENCES \(HTTP://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/TAG/SOCIAL-SCIENCES/\)](http://www.beyondacademia.org/tag/social-sciences/)

[USER EXPERIENCE \(HTTP://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/TAG/USER-EXPERIENCE/\)](http://www.beyondacademia.org/tag/user-experience/)

Subscribe to Beyond Academia for information about upcoming events.
E-mails will only be sent to notify when event registration begins.

➤ Support BA

Donate



Beyond Academia is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. For questions regarding tax-deductible donations please [contact us](mailto:info@beyondacademia.org)
(mailto:info@beyondacademia.org)

➤ Update Us!

Have you attended a Beyond Academia event in the past? Did you find it helpful? Please let us know! We want to know how we can improve our events.

If Beyond Academia was one of your stepping stones towards finding your current career, tell us! We want to know how we helped and where all of you have gone after your time in academia.

info@beyondacademia.org

[EVENTS \(HTTP://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/EVENTS/\)](http://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/EVENTS/)

[BLOG \(HTTP://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/ARTICLES/\)](http://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/ARTICLES/)

[CAREER RESOURCES \(HTTP://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/RESOURCES/\)](http://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/RESOURCES/)

[ABOUT BA \(HTTP://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/ABOUT/\)](http://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/ABOUT/)

[SPONSORS \(HTTP://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/SPONSORS/\)](http://WWW.BEYONDACADEMIA.ORG/SPONSORS/)



<https://www.facebook.com/beyondacademiaberkeley>



<https://twitter.com/BeyondAcademia>



<http://www.linkedin.com/company/beyond-academia>



<http://www.beyondacademia.info/?feed=rss2>

PROUDLY POWERED BY THE
[X WORDPRESS THEME \(HTTP://THEME.CO/X/\)](http://THEME.CO/X/)

Front page campanile photography by: www.wortpracht.co