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IN FOCUS: AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Editorship, Value, and American Anthropology

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Editor-in-Chief

OPENING

The overall framing for this collaborative article is *American Anthropologist*, the flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association, my experiences over five years of editorship, and the experiences of the associate editors responding to my thoughts here. Together, we are here using *American Anthropologist* as an intimate test case with which to think through trends in anthropology and the academy. In these opening thoughts, I set out two key issues for discussion that are often overlooked in debates about the futures of publishing.

The first of these involves the editor subject position. The work of editorship is often ignored or sidelined, particularly when editors are construed as gatekeepers. How can we rethink the subject position of “editor” with regard to anthropological knowledge production? How does the editor role interface with that of ethnographer, author, advisor, theorist, teacher, advocate, and colleague?

The second issue concerns journals in relation to scholarly community. What new configurations do we see in regard to the disciplining and undisciplining of anthropology, within and beyond the academy? What are the consequences of these configurations for ethnographic and theoretical collaboration beyond “anthropology” proper, and for fieldwork methods more generally? How can we recuperate a destabilized and critical notion of the “American” in contemporary anthropology? What are the “American” legacies and trajectories of American anthropology and *American Anthropologist*? What might be new roles for the article genre in anthropological knowledge production?

THE EDITOR SUBJECT POSITION

With regard to the question of the editor subject position, I have come to realize the degree to which the work of editorship is misunderstood and underappreciated. Few scholars go to graduate school seeking a career as an editor; indeed, it is possible to imagine a scholarly career that never includes editing. Anthropologists are no exception to this. We tend to see our work as oscillating between fieldwork and other forms of data collection, writing, and teaching. Most anthropologists will never edit a journal: more will serve on editorial boards, edit a book, and so on, but many will participate minimally in editing even at that level.

Indeed, it bears noting that many journals, even the most established, often struggle to find editors. One reason for this is that editing is simply accorded far less prestige than research. I was lucky to have a very supportive department and dean at Irvine, but some editors do face difficulties in getting their editing work counted for promotion. Research counts far more than service in most forms of assessment, and journal editing is usually classed as service work in the eyes of colleagues and administrators. Because the work of editing slows one’s rate of research and publication, this means that, in effect, editors take a pay cut for the work they do. This is exacerbated by the fact that most editorships provide no salary whatsoever.

These financial and bureaucratic disincentives shape a broader context in which editing has long been demeaned. This has taken several forms. One is the idea that editors damage the work of authors. A well-known example of this is Henrietta Bowdler (1750–1830), whose *The Family Shakspeare* [sic] (1807), with about ten percent of the text removed to expurgate anything “immoral,” was the inspiration for the term *bowdlerize*. Another is the idea that editors are partisan gatekeepers. A third is that editors are failed authors. While most academics would bristle at the adage “those who can, do; those who can’t, teach,” I suspect fewer would protest the phrase “those who can’t write, edit.”

Now, I would never deny that editors are gatekeepers. Most journals receive more manuscripts than they can publish, often many times more than they can publish. Editors do also affect the work that appears in print but rarely in a “bowdlerizing” sense, particularly not without the knowledge or consent of the author. But in my own experience and from interacting with many editors during my editorship, I have come to understand that questions of gatekeeping and intervention miss the point in regard to the core work of editing and the aspects of that work that editors find most rewarding.

What I find particularly fascinating about the editor subject position is that it is a position of laterality, of being alongside the work of another. Editing is a form of intellectual work in which you take on the conceptual project of another scholar and work to increase the persuasive and explanatory power of that project. When you are an editor, in a powerful way it’s not about you. It is about a relation of

enablement or facilitation. It is a deeply perspectival form of work, the work of “fresh eyes” that see anew or askew what someone else sees and says.

In this respect, editing is a deeply ethnographic form of engagement. In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Bronislaw Malinowski spoke of “the final goal, of which an Ethnographer should never lose sight. This goal is, briefly, to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world” (Malinowski 1922:25). In his reworking of this notion of a “native’s point of view,” Clifford Geertz summed it up as “the ability to construe their modes of expression” (Geertz 1983:70). Ethnographic research thus involves representing the lifeworlds of another, and this is predicated on a massive amount of what we can term *editing*. Anthropologists are not just writing culture; it might be more accurate to say we are “editing culture.” From a vast corpus of data, we craft the arguments we present in an article or book. And, in fact, this process is not unlike the work of linguistic anthropologists, biological anthropologists, and archaeologists: all anthropological work—indeed, all scholarly work—involves forms of construal and re-presentation that can accurately be placed in the semantic field of “editing.”

The etymology of *edit* is instructive: the term originally meant to “give out, to publish or give to the world” the literary work of another. The meaning has changed remarkably little. Editing is an inherently social act, collegial in every sense, that requires setting aside one’s own priorities to invest in those of another. In this regard, my favorite part of editing is the editor’s letter I get to write when I have conditionally accepted a manuscript for publication and am providing the author with a last opportunity to revise. In that case, it is particularly clear to the author that I am on their side, standing alongside them and working to help them accomplish their own conceptual goals.

In light of these experiences as an editor, I would pose the following questions: What would be at stake in imagining the editor subject position as integral to the notion of the scholar—as much so as researcher, theorist, or author? How might we regard the work of editing, “editwork,” as a kind of fieldwork in the space of scholarly community, as an ethnographic engagement, a writing of culture in a profound sense? What might be the political and theoretical stakes in thinking of editing as a form of coalitional work, less in terms of hierarchy and more in terms of a lateral standpoint of knowledge production?

JOURNALS AND SCHOLARLY COMMUNITY

These questions of collegiality and coalition lead me to the second broad issue I will address, concerning journals and scholarly community. As I just discussed, one purpose of journals is to evaluate and improve scholarly work through the editorial process. However, journals are obviously more than private editorial services to authors. The whole point of journals is that they publish the scholarly work that their editors have evaluated and helped to craft. Journals are about circulation, and circulation creates value. And not just value in an abstract sense; circulation calls into being an audience,

an imagined community of scholarship. In the contemporary moment, such questions of audience are deeply linked to questions of open access and the digital futures of publishing. There is now a robust and growing body of important work addressing these issues. However, for the purpose of this discussion, I will focus on two important issues less often explored: disciplinarity and the global.

Disciplinarity

Journals do not just meet the needs of preexisting scholarly communities; they conjure into being forms of scholarly community. In this sense, they have disciplinary effects. I do not think this is a bad thing. Disciplinarity is not always negative, and interdisciplinarity makes little sense without it. There are four main ways that disciplines get defined: by object of study (culture, chemistry, the psyche); by method (ethnographic research, literary criticism, statistical inquiry); by canon; and by administrative and bureaucratic histories. It is in regard to the third of these, the question of canon, that journals play a central role. I would thus set out as a hypothesis that all journals have disciplinary effects, even when there are not clear-cut disciplines connected to them: think of a journal like *Comparative Studies in Society and History* or *Public Culture*. Often journals are created with such effects in mind, as in the case of *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, which was founded in 1993—the same year that Kath Weston, in her *Annual Review of Anthropology* article “Lesbian/Gay Studies in the House of Anthropology,” noted that “the inclusion of this essay in a publication such as the *Annual Review of Anthropology* represents an institutionalizing move” (Weston 1993:340).

But while all journals have disciplinary effects, how is this particularly the case in regard to journals labeled “flagship” journals, such as *American Anthropologist* or the *Journal of Asian Studies*? There is usually a clear-cut definition of a *flagship* journal. If there exists a professional association (like the American Anthropological Association or the Association for Asian Studies), and that association has an official journal, then that journal is considered the “flagship” journal of that association, and in theory of the discipline the association represents, though for instance not all scholars would consider “Asian Studies” a discipline. In some cases, like the American Anthropological Association, an association publishes many journals, but one of them is designated the “flagship” journal.

I made two programmatic decisions during my editorship of *American Anthropologist* that had particular resonance with regard to questions of disciplinarity. The first was to add public anthropology to the journal in a fundamental manner that destabilizes the four-field orthodoxy of the Boasian tradition. Through the work of the inaugural associate editor for public anthropology (Barbara Rose Johnston) and the inaugural public anthropology review editors (Melissa Checker, David Vine, and Alaka Wali), we moved public anthropology to the center of specifically theoretical disciplinary debates. This has been useful for disrupting the view that forms of public and engaged anthropology are the mere

“application” of insights developed in the ivory tower and also for recognizing that work in the so-called “ivory tower” often has powerful public impact. It also provides new openings for the discussion of practicing anthropological work coming from nonprofit, governmental, and corporate locations.

The second programmatic decision I made with regard to disciplinarity and *American Anthropologist* was, in essence, to treat *American Anthropologist* as an interdisciplinary journal. As discussed in one of my “From the Editor” commentaries, my goal has been:

to present the best work in “anthropology”—as defined in the broadest possible sense. That certainly includes work that speaks across subdisciplines in some manner. . . . However, it also includes work that, is not invested in the four-field concept and presents itself as, say, cultural anthropology or archaeology, with no reference to a four-field vision of “the discipline.” Indeed, I have no qualms with those who wish to view *American Anthropologist* as an interdisciplinary journal along the lines of *Science* or *Nature*, bringing together compelling works of scholarship without requiring that those works be understood ahead of time as members of a single field. [Boellstorff 2010a:177]

In my view, this approach has been successful for several reasons. It reflects the reality that while most anthropologists read across subdisciplines and in many cases do research spanning subdisciplines, much work—including some of the best work—lies clearly within a single subdiscipline, and that is okay. The danger is that a sense that work submitted to *American Anthropologist* must “speak across the subdisciplines” can lead to a self-selection in which many anthropologists simply do not submit to the journal or contort their arguments in a manner that compromises their clarity and force. As I have noted elsewhere, “the value of a generalist journal like *American Anthropologist* does not inhere in every article appealing to every reader but, rather, in every reader finding something appealing, and perhaps from unexpected quarters” (Boellstorff 2010b:510).

Another reason for the success of this approach is that, in not requiring articles published in *American Anthropologist* to speak across all subdisciplines, we further destabilize the parochialism of the four-field Boasian paradigm (which, as noted earlier, I also destabilized by the inclusion of public anthropology). In no way do I see the work of Franz Boas as irrelevant. Indeed, I see much value in the Boasian tradition that has been obscured by the dominance of the Malinowskian tradition in many anthropological conversations. In particular, I find extremely useful Matti Bunzl’s insight that the Boasian tradition:

offers a radically different understanding of the epistemology of fieldwork. This understanding does not rest on a distinction between ethnographic Self and native Other but, instead, draws its analytic leverage from a rigorous historicity that refigures the question of Otherness in terms of temporal rather than cultural alterity. [Bunzl 2004:437]

However, one of the least beneficial legacies of the Boasian tradition has been the four-field construal of the discipline. I feel this has actually been detrimental to interdisciplinarity and has often fostered departmental

bureaucratic structures that exacerbate conflict and misunderstanding. Treating *American Anthropologist* as interdisciplinary has helped counter these negative aspects of the four-field understanding of anthropology. Given how that understanding of anthropology in the United States is so linked to Boas, treating *American Anthropologist* as interdisciplinary is also helpful for making the journal less U.S. centric, the topic to which I now turn.

The Global

The second issue I want to briefly raise with regard to journals and scholarly community concerns the question of transnationalizing anthropological community. If, as I have just discussed, we can destabilize the second term of *American Anthropologist* by rethinking subdisciplinarity in the context of a flagship journal, how can we destabilize a notion of the “American?”

One obvious and important way to work toward this goal concerns language. This is tricky, because when language stands in for geography all kinds of elisions can result, but it is nonetheless important in terms of building and linking scholarly communities. In some national contexts, there exist journals that regularly publish manuscripts in two or three languages, but such bilingual or trilingual formats are not possible at present for most journals in the United States. A few journals with significant financial resources allow authors to submit manuscripts in non-English languages and then have them translated into English before review, but this is also at present impossible for most journals, including *American Anthropologist*. My introduction of non-English abstracts is one small step toward a more multilingual future, but clearly we should continue the work of imagining other ways to move toward this possible future.

However, I will note in passing that aside from the question of language, there are ways to destabilize notions of the “American” with regard to *American Anthropologist* (and other journals) from a structural perspective. As I have discussed elsewhere, relatively simple changes like not requiring non-AAA members to pay a fee to submit and internationalizing the editorial board have made *American Anthropologist* more welcoming to scholars outside the United States (Boellstorff 2012). Even taking into consideration the financial realities shaping the world of journal publishing, then, we can most certainly discover inexpensive and feasible ways to make journals based in the United States better organs of the transnational scholarly community that has characterized the discipline of anthropology from its beginnings.

CONCLUSION

Being editor-in-chief of *American Anthropologist* has been one of the most transformative experiences of my life, and in ways I did not expect. It has been, above all, a lesson in community and the conditions of possibility for scholarly work. This includes a new appreciation for how forms of community and conversation shape scholarship even when it might seem one is working alone.

With these thoughts, I hope to have contributed to what in my view is a needed conversation about the value of editorship in the anthropological project. In this regard, a final question is: How would anthropological theory and practice change if editing occupied a central position in our imagining of the discipline?

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