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FROM THE EDITOR

An Open Letter to the Search Committee: Three Tips for Choosing the New Editor-in-Chief of *American Anthropologist*

Tom Boellstorff
Editor-in-Chief

To: The search committee for the *American Anthropologist* 2012–16 editor-in-chief position

From: Tom Boellstorff, current editor-in-chief, *American Anthropologist*

Dear members of the search committee,

My term as editor-in-chief of *American Anthropologist* has been an incredible journey: I have learned so much and made valuable new colleagues. Following standard practice, I will not be a member of the search committee that chooses the next editor-in-chief. I am thankful for this because, frankly, it would be one more item to add to an already full portfolio of duties. However, members of the search committee have indicated they would value my input. As I have considered what advice might be useful, I realized that rather than convey recommendations privately to the committee, I could publicize them in an open letter, particularly because I have already written about the benefits of holding the editor-in-chief position (Boellstorff 2009). There is certainly no harm in potential applicants knowing my views concerning what qualities to seek in a candidate. Additionally, although some of my recommendations are specific to *AA*, in the discussion below I have worked to phrase them in a manner that would be applicable to a range of journals. We are in the middle of important discussions about the future of academic publishing, and these discussions must include not only questions of technology, access, and review but also the underappreciated and changing role of editors.

THREE TIPS FOR THE SEARCH COMMITTEE

1. “Bread and Butter” over “Bells and Whistles”

One of the most overhyped (if understandably attractive) questions to pose to potential editors runs along the lines of “what new things would you do with the journal?” Not just for candidate editors but for those who have run journals for extended periods of time, there is often pressure from publishers and readers to innovate, not to mention one’s own desire to try something novel. This desire is understandable,

and I cannot claim to be immune to it, having worked to bring a range of innovations to *AA*, from “Year in Review” pieces to the public anthropology reviews section.

However, one of the phrases that has formed in my head during my years as editor-in-chief (and that I currently find myself uttering with surprising frequency) is “everyone wants to talk about bells and whistles; no one wants to talk about bread and butter.” What I mean by “bread and butter” is the everyday work of making sure manuscripts are reviewed in a timely manner, overseeing production, managing budgets and workflow, collaborating with one’s editorial board and staff, and communicating with other editors and representatives of the American Anthropological Association. These and other ostensibly mundane tasks are the heart and soul of *AA* and every other journal; no special issue or new online feature could exist if this regular work failed to take place. It is for this reason, for instance, that I am prouder of the fact that I have been able to render editorial decisions to authors within one to three months than I am of many more visible accomplishments (e.g., the new cover design I was able to develop during my tenure).

What this means for the search committee is that I strongly urge prioritizing candidates who do not justify their candidacy solely (or even primarily) in terms of “new directions” in which they might take the journal. Look instead for evidence of timeliness, strong organizational skills, and an ability to manage a heavy workflow without resorting to complaints or excuses. Personally, for instance, I would hesitate to consider a candidate who does not respond to e-mails swiftly. Despite the many professional and personal duties we may safely assume will be shared by all applicants for this position, strong candidates should have the organizational skills to prioritize and reply quickly to e-mails from the search committee. If they cannot do this, how on earth can we assume they will respond in a timely manner to a message from their managing editor, an author, or a member of their editorial board—when failing to do so could disrupt the workflow and even delay production of the journal?

2. A Ringmaster not a Visionary

I spoke above of a need to question an overemphasis on “new directions” because the “bread and butter” issues crucial to running a journal effectively are so often sidelined. A second reason for a proper skepticism toward claims of radical innovation is to some extent relevant for any journal but of particular importance for *American Anthropologist*. *AA* is shaped by the combination of two key features. First, it is a “generalist” anthropological journal. It publishes work from all four traditional subfields of anthropology and from such a wide range of methodological and theoretical perspectives that I will not even attempt to enumerate them here. Second, it is the flagship journal of the AAA and is thus often considered to offer the association’s imprimatur on manuscripts it accepts for publication. Taken together, these factors mean that *AA* is watched carefully for the signals it sends about the direction in which the discipline is headed—much more so than I would have suspected before becoming editor-in-chief. Readers will complain, and rightly so, if they feel that a particular subdiscipline or approach is being favored over others.

There is no way to prevent such concerns altogether, particularly given the fact that *American Anthropologist* does not receive an equal number of submissions from all quarters. However, I do think that the editor-in-chief has a crucial role to play in establishing and sustaining *AA*’s status as a top-notch generalist journal. Rather than showing the direction in which anthropology is headed, the editor must, in my view, subscribe to a view of anthropology as headed in multiple directions at once. As I have noted elsewhere, the editor-in-chief of *AA* works best not as a visionary but as a ringleader (Boellstorff 2010). As a result, I urge the search committee to attend to candidates who show an understanding of anthropology as comprising many partially overlapping scholarly conversations and who recognize the goal of the journal as publishing the best in each of those conversations, without favoring any one approach. In my opinion, the most disastrous ideology for any editor-in-chief to hold is that articles published in *AA* should speak across the subdisciplines. In my experience, this can lead to a lowest-common-denominator effect that makes it difficult for authors to push at the boundaries of their own scholarly communities. Of course, work that speaks across subdisciplines is welcome and valued at *AA*, but an ideology holding that the journal should prioritize, solicit, or even exclusively publish such work has the paradoxical effect of narrowing the range of research appearing in the journal, to the detriment of all.

3. Experience as an Author and an Editor

Advertisements for editors often seek persons with prior editorial experience (although I know from my consultation with the search committee that the current call for *AA*’s new editor does not). This is understandable, and I cannot imagine any way in which such experience would detract from someone’s candidacy. However, I do not think it crucial

(not least because I had no previous experience as a journal editor). In my view, two factors are more indicative of someone’s aptitude for becoming *AA*’s new editor-in-chief. The first, mentioned above, is organizational skill (which could be demonstrated in the editorial domain but in other domains as well). The second factor is experience as an author. At the risk of stating the obvious, editors have to read lots of manuscripts and evaluate them along a range of criteria (including the assessments of reviewers). By “experience as an author,” I mean not just that an editor should be a good writer but that they have multiple experiences of getting manuscripts accepted for publication at a range of scholarly journals. This shows that they understand how to engage in quality research and know how to transform the results of that research into compelling articles. Personally, I think a major consideration for selecting a new editor-in-chief of *AA* is that the candidate have themselves had at least one article accepted for publication in *AA* during their career—or, barring that, in another highly ranked anthropology journal—and ideally many articles accepted for publication at a variety of journals.

An editor should be intimately familiar with the processes of revision, resubmission, acceptance, and rejection and should have themselves experienced the highs and lows that come with all these aspects of scholarly publication. In my own case, although I had no prior editorial experience, I had substantial experience publishing books and articles, and I had seen firsthand the difference between pro forma and truly careful and helpful responses from editors. Additionally, when I reject a manuscript (be that with the possibility for revision and resubmission or as a definitive rejection), I work to convey in my prose and the length of my suggestions an empathy for what it feels like to have one’s work rejected from a journal—because I have experienced many such rejections, including from *AA* itself (Boellstorff 2008).

I could think of many other useful qualities for the search committee to seek in selecting a new editor-in-chief for this journal. In keeping myself to three tips—that ideal candidates emphasize the basics of keeping a journal running smoothly over flashy innovation; see their job as presenting a range of views rather than a singular editorial vision; and have experience as an author—I hope to have provided some easy-to-remember guidelines that will be useful to potential candidates themselves. This position is a true gift and joy, and I am thankful that our discipline boasts so many talented and capable scholars who would be more than able to take my place when my term expires. I encourage you to apply for the position of editor-in-chief of *American Anthropologist* by sending a letter of interest by June 1, 2011, to Emilia Guevara, AAA Publications Department (eguevara@aaanet.org), and Laura Graham, *AA* Editor-in-Chief Search Committee Chair (laura-graham@uiowa.edu).

IN THIS ISSUE

This issue of *American Anthropologist* features a range of research articles, reviews, and other materials that any editor

would be proud to present. Four research articles speak across subdisciplines to questions of conflict, war, and inequality. In “Power, Memory, and Prehistory: Constructing and Erasing Political Landscapes in the Naco Valley, Northwestern Honduras,” Edward Schortman and Patricia Urban address how we might better understand “the rhetorical devices by means of which different factions strove to inscribe on the land their relations to power through the strategic use of diverse materials.” Such archaeological attention to articulations of material culture and social inequality appears as well in Marc Levine’s article, “Negotiating Political Economy at Late Postclassic Tututepec (Yucu Dzaa), Oaxaca, Mexico,” in which he argues for understanding not only domination and resistance but also the “more dynamic relationship between the ruling class and its constituents that also included elements of cooperation and collaboration.”

These questions of conflict and inequality appear as well in several of the sociocultural articles that appear in this issue of *American Anthropologist*. In “Psalms and Coping with Uncertainty: Religious Israeli Women’s Responses to the 2006 Lebanon War,” Richard Sosis and Penn Handwerker explore how an apparent association between psalm recitation and lower rates of anxiety among religious Israeli women pertains much more clearly to “the uncontrollable conditions of war” than the “more mundane, controllable stressors” of everyday life in the context of conflict. The topic of war is also central to Paul Roscoe’s “*Dead Birds: The ‘Theater’ of War among the Dugum Dani.*” Roscoe contends that “the theatrical and largely innocuous battles fought by the Dugum Dani of New Guinea” should not just be seen as restrained or ritualized warfare because of the underappreciated role of the local terrain in limiting the lethality of the conflicts in question.

The articles by both Roscoe and Schortman and Urban discussed above draw attention to the role of landscape in war and conflict, and an interest in landscape is also central to “Bouldering in Yosemite: Emergent Signs of Place and Landscape.” In this article, Sally Ness explores how bodily experience and landscape intersect to produce forms of meaning making that challenge many understandings of symbolism and representation. Ness’s interest in landscape brings together a local context (Yosemite National Park) with understandings of “technical disciplines preconceived by translocal—in some respects, market-driven—multinational interests.” This interest in intersections among local, national, and global spatial scales, on the one hand, and among selfhood, society, and meaning making, on the other hand, is also central to “On the Road to Normal: Negotiating Agency and State Sovereignty in Post-socialist Serbia,” in which Jessica Greenberg examines “how perceptions of state crisis and moral decay in Serbia (after the breakup of Yugoslavia) impact people’s belief that they are no longer normal agents capable of effective action.” All these themes appear as well in Peggy Barlett’s article, “Campus Sustainable Food Projects: Critique and Engagement,” which critically examines how staff, faculty, and students

at a range of U.S. universities have worked to implement alternative food systems on their campuses, including struggles over what counts as “alternative” in these debates.

In “Biological Ancestries, Kinship Connections, and Projected Identities in Four Central Anatolian Settlements: Insights from Culturally Contextualized Genetic Anthropology,” Omer Gokcumen and colleagues explore “the impact of social organization and cultural dynamics on the structuring of genetic diversity within and among human populations.” Combining ethnohistorical fieldwork with genetic analysis, they show striking differences between paternal and maternal genetic diversity, indicating that “broad, ethnicity-based sampling is inadequate to capture the genetic signatures of recent social and historical dynamics, which have had a profound influence on contemporary genetic and cultural regional diversity.” A distinct but equally fascinating exploration of the intersections between biology and culture characterizes Stefan Helmreich’s article “Nature/Culture/Seawater.” Drawing from sources ranging from early anthropological theory to contemporary fieldwork among oceanographers, Helmreich examines “seawater as a substance and symbol in anthropological theory,” leading him not just to propose rethinking globalization as “oceanization” but to critique “the turn to the form of water in social theory.”

In addition to this wide range of fascinating research articles, this issue of *AA* features a truly impressive number of book reviews, visual anthropology reviews, and public anthropology reviews, touching on subjects ranging from organ donation and the Human Terrain System to the Chiapas Photography Project. An obituary of the eminent anthropologist Dell Hymes rounds out this issue. In a 1964 *AA* article entitled “Toward Ethnographies of Communication,” Hymes called for work that would “take as context a community, investigating its communicative habits as a whole” (p. 3). In their own ways, each contribution to this issue of *AA* speaks to this question of community as context; I hope that this journal itself contributes to the multifarious conversations making up communities of anthropological practice.

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