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## From the editor:

### What I have learned in the last four years

**T**his is the last issue of *American Ethnologist* under my editorship. Since July 2015, when Angelique Haugerud passed the editorial baton to me, the journal has received about 1,100 manuscripts, which I have read at least once each (many multiple times). Prospective authors have also sent me dozens of manuscripts for a preliminary opinion as to their suitability for *AE*. About 12,000 invitations have gone out to potential manuscript reviewers, 4,000 of whom accepted the invitation; most submitted sometimes detailed and almost always useful evaluations of the merits of and problems with the manuscript. Authors of submissions have received these reports along with a detailed cover letter highlighting the main areas that they need to pay attention to, whether or not the manuscript is accepted.

Editing *AE* has been extremely time consuming but ultimately rewarding. It is a project I could not have undertaken had I been younger or precariously employed, as too many anthropologists are today. And, as I am reaching old age, I will never again have the energy needed for such an endeavor. During the first three years of the editorship, a grant from the European Research Council and, in the last year, a fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University freed me up from teaching duties and enabled me to devote time to editing. For one semester between the grant and the fellowship, I did teach courses, and this was the hardest period. Few universities today consider editing a journal, however prestigious, a legitimate enterprise worthy of accommodation, and my employer was no exception.

I have found considerable satisfaction in helping authors sharpen their arguments and explore the significance of their work for larger questions in anthropology, assisting some to publish their first major article and bringing scholars who are not based in the privileged centers of academia into the conversation. Editing has also been a personally fulfilling experience. I now know about more social and cultural anthropology than I ever thought was possible and can write and talk with confidence about topics I knew

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nothing about four years ago. Editing the journal has given me the opportunity to communicate with many scholars I would otherwise never have had the pleasure to interact with. I have received a lot of fan mail, even from authors of manuscripts I rejected, who expressed their appreciation for the care and seriousness with which reviewers and I approached the review process. Few authors have turned out to be ill mannered or ill tempered, and I have received surprisingly little hate mail and no explicitly articulated death threat.

For many early-career authors, writing for publication is a task shrouded in mystery and the object of considerable guesswork and speculation, much of which turns out to be mistaken. The mysterious aura that surrounds the process has motivated me to conduct workshops on how to best develop an anthropological argument, avoid vacuous statements, and balance ethnography and theory. It also prompted me and *AE* senior copyeditor Pablo Morales to write “Tell the Story: How to Write for *American Ethnologist*” (Besnier and Morales 2018), in which we urge authors to capitalize on one of the most attractive features of ethnographic writing, namely storytelling. Judging from the article’s download numbers, it has proved tremendously popular, even apparently among mathematicians.<sup>1</sup>

While editing the journal in the past four years, I have been backed up by five associate editors—Susan Brownell, Jeanette Edwards, Susana Narotzky, Paige West, and Kevin Yelvington—who have offered their advice when I needed it and who seconded me in decisions on manuscripts authored by scholars with whom I had a conflict of interest. I also received invaluable support from the 50-odd members of the editorial board, the most international and diverse of any major anthropology journal currently in existence. I am very grateful for their professionalism and collegiality.

I owe a considerable debt to the nearly 1,000 authors who submitted manuscripts. The authors of the 167 articles and forum contributions that appeared in print in volumes 43 to 46 are the ones who have contributed most directly to the quality of the journal, as have the hundreds of authors of book reviews. But the heroes of the review process are the thousands of manuscript reviewers who have contributed their expertise to the journal and have done so anonymously, for no reward or acknowledgment other than an automatically generated email thanking them for their input. *AE* does not publish a yearly list of reviewers, as some journals do, because it would be far too long and could compromise the anonymity of the double-blind review process.

### What seems to have worked

*AE* has seen a steady rise in its impact factor, continuing a trend begun on my predecessor’s watch. A journal’s impact factor is the ratio of how many times its articles were cited

in a given number of years to the number of articles it published in the same period. According to a very recent version of the *Journal Citation Report* by Clarivate Analytics, the most notable increase took place in 2018: the two-year impact factor rose from 2.341 to 3.053, and the five-year impact factor from 3.129 to 3.216. These figures pale in comparison to journals in the natural sciences, including journals primarily concerned with archaeology and physical anthropology, but they are commendable for a “slow” subdiscipline like sociocultural anthropology. Of the 90 journals in all subfields of anthropology cataloged in the *Journal Citation Report*, the journal’s rank rose from 14 to 5, and in cultural anthropology *AE* is now the second most cited journal.

Citation counts and other forms of bibliometric data have been subjected to considerable criticism. They can fluctuate unpredictably as the result of many factors, many of which have little to do with intellectual quality. Impact factors are blind to the context in which an article is cited, so both positive and negative citations contribute to them. They can also be manipulated: some journal editors, for example, have been known to encourage authors of accepted manuscripts to cite articles previously published in the same journal or to add a “for further reading” rubric at the end of articles listing topically related articles in the journal, which boost impact factors. These have not been *AE*’s practices. In fact, only 8.4 percent of *AE* citations are to *AE* articles, in contrast to the average self-citation percentage of 11.1 in all anthropology journals. *AE*’s percentage has been steadily decreasing, in contrast to that of other journals of comparable quality, where it has increased.

Despite its limitations, however, bibliometrics commands the attention of university administrators and the technocratic bodies that have long colonized academic lives. We are caught in a vicious circle in which we know that these bibliometric measures should be taken with a large grain of salt, yet they bestow institutional visibility to a journal, encourage readers to read the journal, and increase the number of submissions (and, one hopes, their quality), particularly from junior scholars hoping to forge a career in an increasingly competitive job market. So until we abolish global capitalism, we’d be wise to heed them. What, then, leads an article to be frequently cited?

Here we can find clues in detailed figures on *AE* articles. As faithful readers of the journal know well, *AE* has in the last decade published shorter, expedited articles on topics relevant to contemporary world events, such as the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Missouri; the UK’s 2016 Brexit referendum; the election of a reality-television personality as the US president in 2016; and Europe’s refugee crisis since 2015. These *AE* Forums exemplify a trend toward “engaged” research that, as Sherry Ortner (2019) notes, characterizes the work of many present-day anthropologists who ground their research, perhaps more than ever, in timely

critiques of power and inequality. Other journals publish similar pieces but prefer to corral them onto their website, undertaking a faster, more flexible publishing process. *AE*'s forums all appear in the print edition, but they have not supplanted traditional research articles, which remain the journal's *raison d'être*. Nor should research on cutting-edge political events like the refugee crisis, or "crisis chasing," as Heath Cabot (2019) terms it, become the norm in our discipline.

Yet, as Cabot argues and Yatun Sastramidjaja (2019) further develops in her analysis of keywords and key words in *AE* in the last four years, anthropological research can be engaged, relevant to the moment, and of high quality all at once. This is borne out by our forums, which have proved quite popular: of the 20 most cited articles from January 1, 2016, to June 30, 2019, 10 are forum articles (see Table 1).

In addition, one *AE* forum article is now the most downloaded in the AAA's portfolio of journals: Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa's "#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States" (Bonilla and Rosa 2015), which has outperformed Horace Miner's (1956) "Body Ritual among the Nacirema."<sup>2</sup>

These patterns may be somewhat skewed, since more forums appeared in the first few years of my editorship and older articles tend to be cited more. Yet readers' particular interest in forum contributions is confirmed by download figures. Again, 10 of the 20 most cited articles published in *AE* in 2016–19 are articles published as part of a forum (see Table 2).

All in all, it seems that capturing and maintaining readers' interest in a journal like *AE* depends in part on the "right" balance of traditional research articles and anthropological commentaries on current events. Achieving such balance is a question not only of how many pages are devoted to the forums but also how much time and energy is expended on them: they are complicated to organize, and they place authors, reviewers, editors, and copyeditors under stringent deadlines and tax their goodwill, patience, and intellectual abilities. For this reason, I must thank all the authors who contributed to forums during my editorship.

In the last four years, colleagues have often asked me where I see sociocultural anthropology "heading," as reflected in the work submitted to the journal. I assume that underlying this question is another question: What kinds of issues does one need to work on to get an article accepted in a major journal? I have largely disappointed my interlocutors: it is very difficult to discern any particular trends in the submissions. As Ilana Gershon (2019) remarks in this issue, Sherry Ortner's (1984, 126) description of anthropology as a "a thing of shreds and patches" remains apropos today. But amid the discipline's multiplicity, Gershon identifies a particularly promising trend in works that focus on what she calls "multiple social orders."

The theme itself is not new, being central to the early works on globalization in the 1990s. What is relatively new, however, is that ethnographers are engaging seriously with what it means to live across boundaries, on various scales at once, and between different regimes of power, rather than simply noting that it happens. Rather than simply describing these dynamics as "assemblages" and taking this characterization as a theoretical statement, works in this vein strain to understand the relationships that make up what others might identify as an assemblage. According to what I have read in the last four years, this project is where anthropology might make its greatest contributions in the years to come.

### **What is not working so well**

Despite its many pleasures, editing *AE* has not been a bed of roses. As many have pointed out, the world of academic publishing is in crisis. Over the years it has become a huge, much-criticized capitalist venture; many academics have become deeply cynical of journals that help enrich corporate CEOs in the publishing industry. We have yet, however, to come up with a viable funding model to make all journals open access. Publishing a journal is expensive, and some of the problems that one infamous open-access journal has recently encountered only demonstrate the difficulties involved. Few journals, meanwhile, can maintain minimal standards of quality thanks to cost cutting, the outsourcing of production to the proverbial sweatshops of the Global South, and the proliferation of journals on every obscure topic (to say nothing of the predatory journals that daily invite us to join their editorial boards).

This crisis affects journal editing, which is plagued with problems that did not exist when it was a pen-and-paper affair, as I have learned in conversations with some of my predecessors. The most serious problem is evident in the figures I provide on manuscript reviewers in the first paragraph of this editorial, namely the unwillingness of so many scholars to review manuscripts. Having to contact 18 scholars in order to persuade four to review an early-career scholar's submission is far from unusual, a situation that in my naïveté I was entirely unprepared for when I took on the editorship.<sup>3</sup> This situation has a domino effect on journal editing: because it was so hard to obtain reviews, I found myself looking much more severely at incoming submissions, so the rate of desk rejections increased dramatically during my editorship, thus robbing authors (mostly early-career scholars and scholars on the academic periphery) of the opportunity to receive guidance on how to improve their work. On occasion, I was obliged to return decisions to authors based on only one or two peer reviews.

When I have broached the topic with scholars who were willing to discuss the problem, I have received a predictable

**Table 1.** The 20 most cited articles published in *AE*, vols. 43–46, from January 1, 2016, to June 30, 2019. Forum articles are highlighted in gray.

Article Title	First Author	Year	Two-Year Citations	Total Citations
Representing the “European Refugee Crisis” in Germany and Beyond: Deservingness and Difference, Life and Death	Holmes, S.	2016	65	90
From Brexit to Trump: Anthropology and the Rise of Nationalist Populism	Gusterson, H.	2017	19	27
<i>État de siège</i> : A Dying Domesticating Colonialism?	Hage, G.	2016	16	21
Immobilizing Mobility: Border Ethnography, Illiberal Democracy, and the Politics of the “Refugee Crisis” in Hungary	Kallius, A.	2016	11	18
Trump’s Election and the “White Working Class”: What We Missed	Walley, C.	2017	10	17
Atmosphere: Context, Detachment, and the View from above Earth	Valentine, D.	2016	13	14
“I Am a Radioactive Mutant”: Emergent Biological Subjectivities at Kazakhstan’s Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site	Stawkowski, M.	2016	10	13
Rituals of Care for the Elderly in Northern Thailand: Merit, Morality, and the Everyday of Long-Term Care	Aulino, F.	2016	8	13
The Makeup of Destiny: Predestination and the Labor of Hope in a Moroccan Emigrant Town	Elliot, A.	2016	12	12
Bread-and-Butter Politics: Democratic Disenchantment and Everyday Politics on an English Council Estate	Koch, I.	2016	11	11
The Evangelical Financial Ethic: Doubled Forms and the Search for God in the Economic World	Zaloom, C.	2016	9	11
The Righteous and the Rightful: The Technomoral Politics of NGOs, Social Movements, and the State in India	Bornstein, E.	2016	8	11
Deprovincializing Trump, Decolonizing Diversity, and Unsettling Anthropology	Rosa, J.	2017	8	10
What’s in a Vote? Brexit beyond Culture Wars	Koch, I.	2017	4	9
A Civilized Revolution: Aesthetics and Political Action in Egypt	Winegar, J.	2016	5	7
There Might Be Blood: Oil, Humility, and the Cosmopolitics of a Cofán Petro-Being	Cepek, M.	2016	5	7
Resonant Worlds: Cultivating Proximal Encounters in Planetary Science	Messeri, L.	2017	5	7
Introduction: The 2016 Brexit Referendum and Trump Election	Edwards, J.	2017	5	7
Made in Britain: Brexit, Teacups, and the Materiality of the Nation	Balthazar, A.	2017	4	7

Source: *Journal Citation Reports* (Clarivate Analytics, 2019), <https://jcr.clarivate.com/>.

litany of explanations: “I review for *AE* all the time!” “There are too many journals!” “I receive five manuscript review invitations a day!” “Why me? Fifteen other people are working on this topic.” “I boycott journals that are not open access.” On the last point, the only major open-access journal left in anthropology is still supported by Wiley, so if one boycotts journals that are part of the capitalist juggernaut, one has to boycott *all* journals in the discipline.

It is indeed the case that, in the audit culture in which we live, most academics are spending an inordinate number of their waking hours attending to mind-numbing administrative tasks, above and beyond their increasingly bureaucratized teaching duties. But, with a few notable exceptions, the least enthusiastic manuscript reviewers are in fact the lucky few who inhabit the hallways of elite

institutions, where research is valued and prioritized, and teaching, advising, and administrative duties are relatively light, so overwork and overcommitment do not explain why so many of us refuse to review manuscripts.

In a brief article that we wrote for *Anthropology News* (Grinker and Besnier 2016), I and Richard Grinker, editor of *Anthropological Quarterly*, reminded our colleagues that the peer review process is a system of generalized reciprocity: we gladly accept the generosity of anonymous scholars who evaluate and comment on our work, so it behooves us to return the favor. As anthropologists who have been weaned on the century-old debate on the Maussian gift, we all know the fundamental importance of the obligation to give, to accept, and to counter-give for society to exist. During my editorship, thinking of manuscript

**Table 2.** The 20 most downloaded articles published in *AE*, vols. 43–46, from January 1, 2016, to June 30, 2019. Forum articles are highlighted in gray.

Article Title	Vol.	No.	Downloads
Representing the “European Refugee Crisis” in Germany and Beyond: Deservingness and Difference, Life and Death	43	1	43,921
From Brexit to Trump: Anthropology and the Rise of Nationalist Populism	44	2	16,009
Immobilizing Mobility: Border Ethnography, Illiberal Democracy, and the Politics of the “Refugee Crisis” in Hungary	43	1	11,089
Tell the Story: How to Write for <i>American Ethnologist</i>	45	2	9,136
Deprovincializing Trump, Decolonizing Diversity, and Unsettling Anthropology	44	2	7,506
Trump’s Election and the “White Working Class”: What We Missed	44	2	6,759
An Anthropology of Lying: Trump and the Political Sociality of Moral Outrage	44	2	5,543
<i>État de siège</i> : A Dying Domesticating Colonialism?	43	1	5,480
Introduction: The 2016 Brexit Referendum and Trump Election	44	2	3,914
The Cross-Publics of Ethnography: The Case of “the Muslimwoman”	43	4	3,705
What’s in a Vote? Brexit beyond Culture Wars	44	2	3,497
Rituals of Care for the Elderly in Northern Thailand: Merit, Morality, and the Everyday of Long-Term Care	43	1	3,049
Brexit Britain: Why We Are All Postindustrial Now	44	2	2,840
Anxiety and Cosmopolitan Futures: Brexit and Scotland	44	2	2,741
The Righteous and the Rightful: The Technomoral Politics of NGOs, Social Movements, and the State in India	43	1	2,649
Skill and Masculinity in Olympic Weightlifting: Training Cues and Cultivated Craziest in Georgia	43	1	2,544
Made in Britain: Brexit, Teacups, and the Materiality of the Nation	44	2	2,447
Forms of Exclusion: Undocumented Students Navigating Financial Aid and Inclusion in the United States	43	3	2,412
“I Am a Radioactive Mutant”: Emergent Biological Subjectivities at Kazakhstan’s Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site	43	1	2,282

Source: *Journal Citation Reports* (Clarivate Analytics, 2019), <https://jcr.clarivate.com/>.

reviewing as reciprocity became particularly pertinent when, to my stupefaction, I would receive submissions from scholars who had systematically turned down all review invitations, or when scholars would complain that I had rejected their graduate student’s manuscript, even though these same scholars had done no reviewing in years. Ironically, it is members of the academic precariat who are most likely to take seriously their responsibility in this system of generalized reciprocity, the very same people who are overwhelmed and overcommitted, on the promise that their good citizenship will be rewarded, even though this reward (e.g., in the form of secure employment) may in fact never materialize.

Here I want to add a twist to this picture. Most submissions to *AE* are from scholars attempting to launch an academic career, given that publishing in a journal like *AE* is a sine qua non for getting a job and keeping it. And since most of the scholars we invite to review are established, the latter’s unwillingness to review contributes directly to junior scholars’ academic precarity. In short, established scholars who refuse to review manuscripts help perpetuate inequalities in the profession. They do so by failing to contribute to the development of younger scholars and by passing on to them the burden of manuscript reviewing. This is tantamount to excluding the next generation of scholars from the system.

We have to acknowledge that the era when peer review was invented has passed. This was a time when the amount of scholarship produced was a fraction of what it is today; when one could count on securing an academic job if one’s work showed some promise (and one was well connected); when there were far fewer obligations to fulfill on the job; and when our lives were not controlled by bibliometric measures, grant “acquisitions,” and the “social impact” of our research.

Yet some things have not changed. Modern scholarship still operates according to an important principle: the way to progress in one’s work is to share one’s findings with one’s peers, in journals that draw on a selection of scholars who can check one’s work for accuracy and quality before it goes to print. That task is actually one of the more exciting and enjoyable parts of editing a journal: it is where one gets to see state-of-the-art work developing, and where one has an opportunity to help shape it. People see peer review as a burden; it is actually a privilege, and were it not for all the other pressures on us, it would be understood as a key part of our engagement in the community of scholars working together on the ideas and findings each of us generates. It is one of the few parts of the academic environment that remains the same as it was; we should cherish it.

Inequality in the profession takes other forms, such as the disparities between scholars at elite research

institutions and those at teaching institutions, between academics in the Global North and those in the Global South, and researchers who speak English natively and those who command other languages. As I noted in my first “From the Editor” column (Besnier 2016), I planned to accept submissions written in languages other than English and to have them reviewed in the original language, with the aim of having them translated into English if accepted.<sup>4</sup> This well-intentioned project turned out to be naive. Most non-English submissions turned out to be lacking or far too short, undeveloped, or disorganized (even according to the writing conventions of the original language), and I thus had to desk-reject most. Those that I did send out for review could find few willing reviewers with the appropriate linguistic competence. While I take pride in having chaperoned a few manuscripts authored by scholars located in the academic periphery, *AE* nevertheless continues to largely privilege submissions authored by scholars working in elite institutions in the Global North, a problem for which I am unable to offer a solution.

### Some final thoughts

My editorial work in the last four years could not have been possible without the contribution of several people: senior copyeditor Pablo Morales, whose skills at turning text into elegant prose leaves many authors in awe; in Amsterdam, Annick Vollebergh and Yatun Sastramidjaja, who provided invaluable editorial assistance in the first year and the last three years of the editorship respectively; book review editor Eric Gable and book review copyeditor Holly Carver, who have taken expert care of book reviews; and editorial office assistant Julie Neithercutt, who has handled a multitude of tasks with invariable professionalism and good humor. For their financial contributions, I also thank the Global Health Program and the Amsterdam Institute for Social Research at the University of Amsterdam.

I am happy to pass into the good hands of my successors a journal that continues to garner the respect of the discipline and that reflects anthropology’s potential to make a difference in the world. Despite the problems with academic publishing in particular and the academic world in general, I hope that authors, particularly those who are in the early stages of their intellectual and employment trajectories, will continue to think of *AE* as an attractive outlet for their best work and a source of pedagogical advice. I also hope that established scholars will fulfill their responsibility to the younger generation.

### Notes

*Acknowledgments.* I am grateful to Susan Brownell, Sarah Green, Monica Heller, and Susana Narotzky for their comments on earlier drafts of this piece.

1. Soumhya Venkatesan, personal communication.
2. This is a good moment to urge all our readers who assign journal articles in their courses not to distribute them as PDFs. They should, rather, have their students download the articles individually. Download figures matter considerably as a measure of an article’s readership and may help boost a journal’s finances. For example, the AAA’s journals receive financial support from their publisher, Wiley, according to their download figures.
3. Having four reviewers per submission might seem excessive, but it contributes directly to improving a manuscript, whether or not it ends up published in *AE*. The reviewers will often have complementary expertise and can identify different ways that a manuscript can be improved. Journals have an important pedagogical role to play, and the number of reviewers involved is crucial.
4. Another innovation I made was to have all article abstracts translated into the language(s) of the article’s field site, as a (largely symbolic) way to increase the international reach and visibility of the journal, as well as to acknowledge the participation of the people whose lives we research. I am pleased to say that this has worked reasonably well, despite the unanticipated complications that it has introduced (e.g., language checking and the layout of the first page).

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