

EDITORIAL CURATION AND THE DURABILITY OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL IDEAS IN A TIME OF AMBIENT INNOVATION: A Comment on the Thirtieth Year of *Cultural Anthropology*

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“The ideal CA submission is one that will say something unexpected yet generative . . .”

—Editors’ Introduction to 30.1, *Cultural Anthropology*

I would like to launch my comment on the journal’s thriving present by recalling two passages from an essay I wrote at the end of its beginning—for the first issue of my last year as editor (Marcus 1991, 122–23):

The first issue of *Cultural Anthropology*, a quarterly, appeared in February 1986. The journal was established as the official organ of the newly formed Society for Cultural Anthropology (SCA) within the major parent professional organization, the American Anthropological Association (AAA). This new society was the inspiration of a number of leading cultural anthropologists (e.g., David Schneider, Roy D’Andrade, Clifford Geertz) who had developed their reputations during the 1960s and who felt that the parent organization had lost its vitality as an intellectual forum for the discussion and debate of ideas in anthropology. The formation of this subsociety was a part of a general trend of fragmentation into specialized groups within the AAA during the 1970s and 1980s. The founders of the SCA were clearly concerned about the absence of a coherent vision in contemporary anthro-

pology, or even any focusing debates [earlier debates had since ossified into tribes]. They looked to the activities and the journal of the new society to overcome a sense of malaise since the decline in enthusiasm for a number of 1960s theoretical initiatives, including French structuralism, Marxism, and cognitive studies.

When the SCA was formed in the mid-1980s, there was an internal critique of Anglo-American anthropology that was emerging and taking hold as a focus of attention among cultural and social anthropologists in the United States. This critique derived its power from an exposure of the conventions, tropes, and rhetoric of anthropological writing. Making transparent the narratives of scripts by which the production of anthropological knowledge had proceeded, rather than suggesting a new, alternative narrative, seemed to be an important move to make for most anthropologists, however much or little sympathetic they were to such an effort. I suspect that I was offered the task by the SCA board of creating and editing the journal because the discipline's own internal critique seemed to be where there was a modicum of focused intellectual dynamism at the moment, and this was logically the point from where its revitalization might occur.

The mid-1980s critique can only be partly explained as the culmination of an evolving internal critique within the discipline. Its power, in fact, derives from a much broader process of transformation that is affecting the practices of all of the disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, of which the critique of anthropological writing is one variant. Yet, the critique and debate about the production of knowledge in anthropology are a particularly important case of the more general trend, first because, unlike most other disciplines affected, the debate in anthropology has occupied a central focus of attention in which the identity of the discipline itself is at stake for its practitioners. And second, the critique of knowledge in anthropology was produced by a working alliance of scholars inside and outside of anthropology, that is, of historians and critics, focusing upon the discipline, and of practitioners within it. This alliance across the boundaries of the discipline itself made it difficult to dismiss or marginalize the critique.

Then, under the section heading, "Strategies for 'Making a Statement' through Editorial Arrangement and Composition" (Marcus 1991, 126) . . .

From an editorial perspective, the actual content and arguments within the articles published [in CA] are themselves not enough to make the statement of purpose that the journal intends. To the contrary, in a state of emergence and transition in how knowledge is produced and represented, especially as seems to be the case with anthropology, the question of editorial design or collage in arranging articles for issues is crucial. In fact, the effect of arrangement or juxtaposition should be a clearly established element of attention for readers, not to distract them from the content of the articles, but to enhance or create a special context for them. Stimulating readers to guess the logic of composition of an issue is a “mystique,” which I believe a journal with an agenda of shifting or transforming a discipline’s practices should cultivate. Perceiving themes that run through the articles of a particular issue, or becoming aware that arguments in certain articles are actually contested by the arguments of other ones, which at first glance have little to do with one another, creates a special interest in reading the journal that draws attention to the coherent and salient purposes around which the journal is produced at the present time.

While the moment of cultural anthropology’s critical self-assessment has long passed, perhaps the most enduring legacy of the period that the founding of *Cultural Anthropology* expressed is the organization of its research, not by a return to anything like paradigms, foundations, or broad and sustained theoretical alignments (such as the political economists/materialists versus the symbolic analysts/interpretivists versus cognitive anthropologists), but to research programs of variable traction and uncertain duration. These are guided more by engagement with events in the world as they unfold with ever more perceived rapidity (and to which the still-emblematic patient fieldwork method requires visceral, immersive access) and by an alignment and critical analytic engagement with found thinking, however it is organized and articulated in practices, conflicts, and daily living. Anthropologists increasingly enter into the constituted projects of others to articulate their own in relation to them. They prize concept work and analytics that are highly original, but that are also traceably derivative and mimic or evoke the terms or stakes of life lived elsewhere, and that research through fieldwork reaches.

Anthropological arguments unto themselves, such as those journals stage (thus far at least . . .) have double lives and are at least double-voiced, after Mikhail Bakhtin. At the levels of theoretical awareness and disciplinary self-aware-

ness, this at most allows for the recognition of turns in research activity (once, for example, the postmodern turn, now, the infrastructural turn, or ontological turn, etc.), rather than more enclosing, theory-built paradigms, and for a much looser constitution of adjectival subfields amid unexpected configurations of multiple co-occurring and speculative research endeavors, which are energized by finding each other, so to speak (e.g., anthropology's distinctive recent contributions to understanding crises of finance capitalism arguably derive as much, if not more, from the influence of the parallel rise of science studies as from a cumulative economic anthropology; there are many other such examples).

The theory tendencies, applications, and topical concerns of the so-called postmodern (poststructuralist?) era eminently prepared anthropology for its various engagements through fealty to fieldwork in a world in which speed of change has become a defining characteristic and challenge to the deliberate slowness and patience that constitutes the essence of anthropological research. Concept work and speculation—prototyping analytic ideas that are much engaged offstage, with what counts as local knowledge today in the way that research is complexly framed—are the hallmarks of scholarly production. The journal research article, perhaps on the way to a monograph, and more important, the other inventions and forums for following and commenting on the contemporary that technology and editorial ingenuity afford, does not serve to build a field, subdiscipline, or theoretical tendency as much as to inform the shifting understandings of collective observers. Along the way, useful concepts, systematic and sustained perspectives come and go. They last for as long as they seem relevant both to discussions among anthropologists and to those they are party to in fieldwork. The embracing of open access as a true innovation in journal availability, along with the kinds of forums and discussions that digital media afford academic journals, can only further this kind of engagement by making visible and creating new receptions and relations that have in fact shaped the research tendencies of anthropology for decades but have been offstage, or at most, in the wings, of the media of scholarly communication.

The primary function of a journal with CA's trajectory is to register, and to some extent, to provide the media to modulate the duration and development of the coming and going of anthropology's research tendencies and programs. It is to manage the relative slowness of anthropological research as a key positive value with a sensation of a sometimes unbearably sped-up pace of contemporary events and changing conditions of existence, normatively keyed to acting by innovation, and in which the analytic default is to concentrate reflective, value-

laden critical thinking on the temporality of the emergent or the detectable near future. Being moved by the perception of speed and focusing creative thought on anticipating a near future define a powerful mode of creative thinking in organizations of all types today, marked everywhere in the policy and action-oriented tangibles of innovation. This provides attractive sources and allies for anthropological research, although it shares different stakes through its modes of deliberation and internal scholarly communication. The will to innovate—actually a key found thematic of contemporary social action of interest in anthropological research—often means sacrificing, through much-praised collective deliberative processes, promising ideas deserving of more development in other circumstances. Parallel anthropological debates with their own expressive and communicative forms increasingly provide those other circumstances to hold onto and assess powerful and relevant ideas a while longer and in the name of the interests of different constituencies perhaps. They prolong the shelf life of ideas and reflexively and critically develop them into other arguments as they are retailed at definite velocities in found settings driven by innovation for the purposes of social engineering and technical problem-solving, and spurred by markets.

Given changes in the scholarly journal form and in its economy of production, what is now available to it as form requires much more of editorial teams, and offers them more creative discretion regarding content, now enhanced by unpredictable, expanded chains of reception. This function is often referred to today as curation or curatorial skill—a desirable term of status that is associated with the trendy and perhaps elitist overtones derived from its most common usage in museums and art worlds, with some agonism regarding credit for where the soul of much-prized creativity should rest. Its migration to serve as a more routine term to refer to and think about the skills necessary to manage digital communication has enhanced its value as a keyword of substance for thinking through the task of scholarly journal editing. In retrospect, as evoked above in my 1991 essay, CA was driven by curatorial impulses, perhaps more primitively, more gesturally, from the start. Now the editorial curatorial task is complex, in a new terrain of expanding affordances, but also more interesting and more fun. It has been brilliantly and distinctively advanced beginning with the editorship of the Fortuns and vigorously sustained since then, and now extended in full creative energy and burgeoning at the beginning of *Cultural Anthropology's* thirtieth year. I am so proud.

REFERENCES

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