CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, 1992–1996

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I became the second editor of *Cultural Anthropology* in 1991, with my first issue published in 1992. It was volume 7, issue 1. It might be of some interest to readers to understand the stakes of the journal at that time—or at least how I thought of them.

The journal came into being under George Marcus's editorship, at a time when his work with *Writing Culture* and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* was gaining much attention (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986). I don't know how many people remember that the founding of the Society for Cultural Anthropology (SCA) was occasioned by the desire of some senior members of the field of cultural anthropology to have what they thought of as a serious fellowship and what others called a more "elite" venue in which anthropological matters could be discussed and pursued. In those days, members of the society had to be nominated and elected. Shortly thereafter, the idea of the journal emerged. Marcus became the editor, and as I remember, the directions he pursued—absolutely in line with his own theoretical trajectories—were not entirely popular with all the senior founding members of the society. At this time, Marcus's trajectory was referred to as postmodern; for some, this was a condemnation, for others, it was cause for celebration.

George and his editorial board made the journal a new and lively place, open to all kinds of new writing—"experimental" writing, as it was called—and

different genres. The postmodern included many different things: new voices emerged, and George was open to longer-form writing, critical essays, as well as to traditional work, putting articles together in novel ways, and even encouraging essays from non-anthropologists. Since this isn't a research article, I will simply assert my memories here to say that these new directions disturbed many anthropologists. It probably wasn't what the senior anthropologists, and founders of the society and the journal, had expected. No doubt George and others enjoyed the Young Turks standing they had. The journal prospered as some senior anthropologists embraced it and younger scholars found a voice in it.

I can't say that I was necessarily a part of the developments as they began at *Cultural Anthropology*, but my own experience as a scholar of Indigenous Australia, engaging with the problems of representation of fourth world peoples, gave me a sense that the traditional objects of the discipline were fragmenting, dispersing, and that new objects were emerging out of the changing relationships of anthropologists to their research subjects. It seemed to me at the time that the postmodern movement included both a kind of Nietzschean skepticism about the possibility of knowledge in anthropological texts (as articulated in deconstructions of classical anthropological writings), and also a critical reflexivity about the cultural and political locations of anthropological knowledge and its production—a sense of anthropology itself as a cultural activity. Perhaps I should remind readers today that Marshall Sahlins (1976) had articulated this—albeit in less political terms—in *Cultural and Practical Reason*, and Indigenous critics of anthropology had also identified this conundrum. In two articles I published on my own research right around the time I became *Cultural Anthropology*'s editor (Myers 1988, 1991), I was engaging exactly with the problem of anthropological knowledge and its circulation, so the project of the journal closely tied into my personal trajectory. I probably had less interest than George in experimental writing and was drawn more to the politics of representation—but these differences coalesced around a sense that the "crisis of representation" (as George called it) offered new opportunities and circumstances for anthropological work. I was myself suspended in the threads of the debates around which the journal had crystallized.

I feel fortunate that the SCA committee selected me as the editor of *Cultural Anthropology* to follow George Marcus. I believe the choice was made because I supported the journal's direction and its theoretical orientations, while also showing a bit more commitment to the empirical dimensions of work in these new directions. I was conservative enough to quiet the traditionalists and radical enough to continue the direction—with a bit more attention to the ethnographic

data themselves. It was a great opportunity and I felt excited to take on this new responsibility.

The journal migrated out of Rice University, and its close relationship to the Rice Circle as a crucible of anthropological experiment, to New York University and a different set of external social relations. In the beginning, of course, the articles I published were all or mainly those George had already accepted. I tried to mix them up in ways I thought would give some impression of my editorship and elicit articles from people who had not previously thought of *Cultural Anthropology* as a place to publish. I felt I needed to signal that we weren't only interested in "that kind of work," but I had no desire to turn away from the critical trajectory we had established. The goal was to reach more people and, if possible, extend the framework to explore the shifting boundaries of knowledge production, between disciplines and also between anthropology and the world. I presented my vision for the journal in the first number I published. I still like that vision, and it may make clearer what we were attempting to do if I quote part of the original statement:

> *Cultural Anthropology* offers an unusual opportunity for delineating new developments in the anthropological study of social life, especially in expanding the perspectives of the field in facing the challenges presented by the changing historical conditions of cultural practice and cultural analysis. A principal dimension of this change has been the shifting of boundaries between those who study and those who are the subjects of study, as well as a radical reorganization of the boundaries *between* disciplines and their relocation in the world. Many of us have experienced that disorientation that can occur when literary critics, political scientists, film studies experts, and anthropologists are all attempting to understand the same phenomena.
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> The current climate in universities, in the arts, and in other cultural venues suggests that a good deal of ferment and reconsideration remains ahead. In my own view, the possibility or necessity of such reconsiderations is exciting and demanding of creative response from anthropologists. One of the greatest challenges to anthropology, I believe, is the development of "cultural studies" in other disciplines. This challenge should not be understood as academic turf warfare, but different disciplines have different histories, problematics, and practices of engaging the data of the world. At the same time, anthropology's own categories have been constructed and or-

ganized in a set of practices and contexts that have been challenged periodically since World War II.

These challenges have been seen by some as refutations of anthropology. This seems ironic for American anthropology, at least, which took as its mission from the start a critical stance concerning ethnocentrism. Such critiques should not make anthropologists defensive, but rather they should engage us in rethinking our work—even at the level of formulating undergraduate texts and courses. Given all this, the conditions of production, distribution, and consumption of anthropological knowledge and the related forms of its representations are critical concerns that should frame the research published in the pages of *Cultural Anthropology*. (Myers 1992, 3)

A few qualities distinguished the journal. First, we managed to publish articles of varying length, some quite long and others quite short. Second, I reserved the right as editor to reject submissions without review if I thought they were not in the spirit of our vision. This was not standard practice for scholarly journals, but given the mission of *Cultural Anthropology*, I continued this editorial prerogative as George had established it. I hope I didn't make too many enemies, but a relatively new journal of the sort needed not only to publish what was worthy scholarship but also to extend sorts of scholarship and writing. As editor, my obligation was not only to publish what was acceptable but also, perhaps more so, what was new, pushing boundaries in interesting ways. This was a curatorial enterprise, as I understood it, to show what the discipline could and should be doing. That possibly sounds rather self-important. I didn't regard myself as the producer of new directions, but as more of a filter. In 1992, however, many of us did feel that a turning point had been reached. In this sense, editing the journal at this time was a privilege. I was able to take part in these explorations, to see them in the making. It was not simply a matter of my pursuing a vision as editor; rather the journal wanted to allow visions to be seen, read, and criticized.

I am trying to remember how many submissions we had each year. I think something between 150 and 200. Obviously, even then, we could not publish all of them. The submissions, moreover, came in print form and had to be handled as manuscripts, in one big filing cabinet. I managed to convince the university and the department to let me have an office, which housed this filing cabinet, a computer on which we logged the articles, and a graduate student editorial assistant who worked twenty hours per week. That made for the totality of our enterprise to manage the journal. Yes, I forgot. We also had a telephone line.

The flow of manuscripts grew, and it was not easy to keep abreast of sending them out for review (I used two reviewers for each paper), editing them for grammar and style, getting them to the publishers and then the galleys to the authors, and we did fall behind. The filing cabinet filled with manuscripts in progress, manuscripts rejected, manuscripts being revised.

One interesting dimension of editing the journal during this period was the occasional inquiry from senior scholars who had heard of the journal's "difference." I can remember having a manuscript submitted and reviewed, and being told by the author that we could "take it or leave it," but that the author had no intention or interest in rewriting or revising. I suppose that to the non-editorially indoctrinated, the answer to such a stance would be simply to send it back. But for a fledgling journal still trying to establish itself and draw in new forms of work from authors of varying histories, such behavior did not seem productive. Regarding the journal as a combination of vetted research articles and curated innovative research and writing, I thought we had a different mandate to pursue. Not simply acting as a judge with thumbs up or thumbs down, which would have been easier, I found it more productive to work with such authors, in hopes of having work from scholars of reputation—if there was something genuinely of interest—and sometimes, to waive my criticisms with the expectation that having such work out there would provoke its own effects in the anthro-sphere of commentary.

I don't know if such editorial decisions would be acceptable to those with abstracted imaginations of professionalization and strict interpretations of quality. We did not accept work simply because it was written by people of reputation. We were, rather, interested in work that might not fit easily into the usual canons of judgment if it might propel discussion, questions, explorations. Most articles were not of this sort. Yet such was the mandate of *Cultural Anthropology* when I became the editor, the mission of this distinctive journal when it was established. I loved the chance to engage with quirky and eccentric pieces, longer-form essays, and especially finding the work of emerging scholars. That is, of course, the great privilege and pleasure of editing.

We sought to increase the readership, to be different enough to provide a forum for scholars who thought they might be doing something distinctive, even to publish work that was not, strictly speaking, anthropological if it spoke to anthropological questions. This was to continue the mission and to expand its audience. At the same time, I did try to apply more rigorous empirical standards, to tighten the reviewing process in such a way that work that was formally

interesting but not empirically as strong as it should have been would be held back for revision. Thus, having established the existence and value of experiment and innovation, we could insist that work satisfy the research expectations even of those antagonistic to the new movements.

I suppose one could call this an establishmentarian move. I certainly received some communications that suggested I was less than a visionary, just as I heard from more traditionalist scholars that I was abetting the enemy. In hearing these complaints, I knew I had struck a good chord.

Our submissions continued to increase, and—I am proud to say—the journal succeeded in becoming widely acceptable without giving up its mission.

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