

A Sea Change in Anthropology? Public Anthropology Reviews

Melissa Checker, David Vine, and Alaka Wali,
Public Anthropology Review Editors

ABSTRACT In this article, we introduce the inaugural issue of the “Public Anthropology Reviews” section. We suggest that the new section reflects significant changes underway in the discipline, including an expansion in the kind of work valued among anthropologists, new ways in which anthropological knowledge is being produced and disseminated, and an acknowledgment that anthropologists have a responsibility to dedicate their skills to issues of broad public import. The section will, thus, expose AA readers to some of the new anthropological work appearing in a wide variety of media and nontraditional academic formats that aims both to communicate primarily with nonanthropological audiences and to have an impact on critical issues of wide social significance. We here present the reviews in this issue, identify additional contemporary issues likely to be addressed in future reviews, and welcome submissions and critical feedback for the section.

Keywords: public anthropology, practicing anthropology, applied anthropology, new media, activism

For well over a decade, there has been change afoot in anthropology. Anthropologists—from students to those working inside and outside of academia—have been revolting against some of the discipline’s traditional confines. Many have been insisting that anthropology break out of conversations that have all too often become insular and exclusionary while expanding the kinds of work valued in the field. This call represents a cyclical pattern in our discipline as we periodically assess the impact of our profession on the contemporary world. Although many anthropologists have worked tirelessly in the public realm for years, the past decade has brought a more widespread and concerted movement among students, academics, and practicing anthropologists alike. They are insisting that anthropologists regain, reinvigorate, and institutionalize the political and social engagement that has been a part of the discipline almost from its beginnings, including the antiracism of Boas through the antiwar and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Many are urging anthropologists to stop complaining about their lack of public relevance and make themselves relevant.

The inauguration of the “Public Anthropology Reviews” section in this issue of the flagship journal of the American Anthropological Association marks an important step in the change that is underway. While acknowledging the many

anthropologists who have long engaged in public work, the section also recognizes that under a variety of names (public, practicing, public interest, etc.) the discipline as a whole has transformed. First, it marks an important expansion in the kind of work that is valued among anthropologists—beyond just the world of journal articles and academic volumes. Second, it calls attention to the revolutionary new ways in which anthropological knowledge is being produced and disseminated. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it reflects a rethinking of anthropology’s purpose, an acknowledgment that anthropologists have a responsibility to be active members of broader public communities, to communicate their research and insights to wider public audiences, and to dedicate their skills to issues of broad public import.

Initially envisioned and initiated by Barbara Rose Johnston, Associate Editor for Practicing Anthropology, and Tom Boellstorff, the Editor-in-Chief, this section is intended to expose the AA readership to some of the new anthropological work, appearing in a wide variety of media and nontraditional academic formats, that aims both to communicate primarily with nonanthropological audiences and to have an impact on critical issues of wide social significance. The section will highlight work including blogs, websites, online videos, other forms of new media, policy papers, expert

reports, other forms of “gray literature,” treaties, public testimony, journalism, op-eds, public-educational materials, participatory research, conferences, art, theater, multimedia presentations, and much more. In these pages, we will explore innovative and effective mechanisms for communicating anthropological research and knowledge outside academia, which are currently helping to deepen the discipline’s public impact. Other sections will continue to review a growing number of works of public anthropology when they take the form of books, films and videos, and museum exhibitions. This section will not review these media but instead complement and expand what *American Anthropologist* considers relevant scholarship and professional work.

In the spirit of a public anthropology, reviews will offer constructive and engaged critique, addressing a work’s demonstrated or potential impact on an intended audience while also discussing its contribution to anthropological theory, method, and practice. Reviews will also feature clear, engaging, and broadly accessible writing that aims to be thoughtful and thought provoking. The section will itself offer experiments in form, including dialogic reviews presenting conversations between an anthropologist and an “interlocutor” discussing the impact and import of an anthropologist’s work. Soon we will be able to provide free access to all reviews covering open-access materials (which will be the vast majority) on the AAA website—thanks to the generous agreement of Wiley-Blackwell Publishing.

This issue begins with David Price’s review of anthropological blogs, analyzing blogging’s potential to expand the discipline’s public impact and change the production and dissemination of knowledge. Michael Powell engages with the prophetic (and best-selling) journalism of anthropologist Gillian Tett, who warned of dangers in the financial system long before the global economic crash of 2008. Next, two reviews examine the possibilities of public-policy papers: Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz analyzes policy recommendations designed to influence immigration-reform debates proposed by a task force investigating human rights on the U.S.–Mexico border, and Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh dis-

cusses a National Parks Service technical briefs series and its significance for public archaeology and public engagement with archaeological research. Finally, Jim Igoe and Alaka Wali analyze, respectively, “Sidewalk Radio” and “Digital Ethnography”: two web-based projects charting new directions in anthropologically informed video while investigating the tobacco industry, global public health, and how new digital technologies are changing our society and the most intimate parts of our lives.

Future sections will review works engaging in original ways with other critical contemporary issues including war and the military, Afghanistan and Iraq, public health and health-care reform, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, the environment, human rights, immigration, public anthropologies outside of the United States, and transnational anthropological collaborations. We are accepting submissions for materials to be reviewed on an ongoing basis (please submit to publicanthreviews@gmail.com).¹ We also welcome your suggestions, critique, and other feedback as we continue to build this new section of *American Anthropologist*.

The inauguration of this section marks an important step in the transformation of anthropology. We hope these pages contribute significantly to this process, but we know there is still much work to be done.

Melissa Checker *Department of Urban Studies, City University of New York–Queens College, Flushing, NY 11367*

David Vine *Department of Anthropology, American University, Washington, DC 20016*

Alaka Wali *Nuveen Curator in Anthropology and Director, Cultural Understanding and Change, Environment, Culture, and Conservation Division, The Field Museum, Chicago, IL 60605-2496*

NOTE

1. As with other sections of *American Anthropologist*, the editors will maintain a strict conflict-of-interest policy, requiring the full disclosure of any relationships between reviewers and works under review.