



Open Anthropology

A PUBLIC JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Marriage and Other Arrangements

Volume 1, Number 1

April 2013

Preface: Introducing Open Anthropology

Leith Mullings

On behalf of the American Anthropological Association's Executive Board, I welcome readers to the inaugural issue of Open Anthropology, an on-line, public journal designed to bring anthropological insight to important public conversations. We extend our thanks to Alisse Waterston, the first editor of this experimental pilot project, who worked hard to put it together.

Anthropology is the science of humankind, past and present, across societies and cultures. The anthropological perspective is distinct from most social sciences in that it does not accept specific cultural forms and societal arrangements as given or 'natural', but seeks to understand the conditions in which they came to be. As we apply anthropological knowledge-- gained from the study of humans and primates through history and across societies-- to pressing social issues such as family, war, health, migration, inequality, we ask how these emerge, and are reproduced or transformed. The answers to these questions may provide unique insights into addressing pressing social issues.

In our inaugural issue, we shine the anthropological spotlight on marriage and family. The articles speak to the different arrangements humans create, as well as the historical and social conditions that support and constrain them. Each issue of the journal, developed around an important public concern, includes articles from across the portfolio of journals of the American Anthropological Association. The Editor's Note will open up anthropology to the non-specialist reader by drawing attention to key themes and issues raised in the articles.

Alisse Waterston

"There is no subject on which more dangerous nonsense is talked and thought than marriage."
— George Bernard Shaw, [Getting Married](#), 1908

Marriage is the topic we undertake in the inaugural issue of *Open Anthropology*, the public journal of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). Anthropologists have been examining "marriage and other arrangements" since the birth of the discipline. We invite you to sample what anthropologists have learned about marriage, a social and cultural phenomenon whose diverse forms and purposes cannot be understood without grasping its relation to a wider set of conditions that surround it.

Contextualizing Anthropology

In introductory classes, students learn that anthropology is the study of humankind, and that the discipline takes a "holistic" approach to understanding humanity in all its aspects. Anthropology is the broadest of all the academic disciplines: the big picture is the starting point for exploring the interconnections between specific phenomena. In describing the discipline, the AAA states that anthropology is drawn from "biological and physical sciences as well as the humanities and social sciences." These multiple sources comprise threads and patches that are woven into an enormous tapestry we call anthropological knowledge.

"Anthropology is an argument," Eric Wolf once remarked to students in a graduate class he taught years ago at the City University of New York (I was there, one of those students). The statement reflects something at once wonderful and frustrating about the discipline.

Anthropology is ever open to alternative interpretations and fresh conclusions suggested by new evidence and argumentation. In this aspect it is wonderful. But for those who want absolutes — who hang their hopes on the idea of some kind of ultimate reality, anthropology refuses to accommodate. In this aspect it can be frustrating.

Anthropology is open-minded and it opens minds. This is why I love anthropology. It compelled me to step outside myself to examine my own assumptions — what I always believed to be "just true." Anthropology taught me how to "problematize," a process by which social and cultural phenomena are not taken as "givens," but are questioned: just because something seems normal and natural, doesn't mean it is.

Human beings are incredibly inventive, having created diverse systems of beliefs and rituals, and having constructed any array of customs and behaviors. Humans also have an amazing capacity to create narratives of their own worlds, though they all too often imagine these narratives as if they reflect the only possible world, or the most important or the most virtuous of worlds.

Anthropology offers a different way of seeing the world — what some might call "perspective." From this vantage point, "all the world's a stage"; anthropologists gaze upon it as participant-observers, trying to figure out what's going on and why. They strive for insight though the ability to understand has not been perfected. Today, most anthropologists are aware they are products of

their own cultures, their own time and place in society and history, a state of being that can cloud vision — shape what they see and how they interpret it. But the anthropological task is to resist the narrow view, and do so in specific ways: asking questions, contextualizing phenomena, gathering and examining evidence, offering explanations.

The Nigerian writer [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](#) has spoken eloquently about "the danger of the single story" — how it can flatten experience, appear definitive, engender pity, break human dignity and malign whole groups of people.

I believe anthropology takes up Adichie's call to make many stories. Indeed, some of these stories may be found on the hundreds of thousands of pages in the [full AAA journal collection](#).

"When we reject the single story," Adichie offers, "we regain a kind of paradise." If deeper understanding of humanity is a kind of paradise, then anthropology is one road to getting there.

Marriage and Other Arrangements

Marriage is a fitting topic for the inaugural issue of *Open Anthropology* considering the vast amount of cross-cultural anthropological research on the subject, and the big play it gets in national and local politics, in popular media and in courtroom decisions. Just this spring of 2013, marriage is brought to the United States Supreme Court in [two important cases](#): *Hollingsworth V. Perry* and *United States V. Windsor*, a pair of cases that have implications for the right of same-sex couples to marry.

The justices might find the anthropological record useful and relevant to their deliberations. That record suggests that when it comes to marriage, there is neither one pattern nor one "correct" form. Instead, across time and place there is enormous diversity in this thing we call marriage, an arrangement that always stands in relationship to other social, political and economic conditions.

In ten articles and two book reviews, this collection offers a sample of the anthropological record on marriage and other arrangements. The compilation begins with "Re-Evaluating Primate Monogamy" by [Agustin Fuentes](#), a [biological anthropologist](#) at the [University of Notre Dame](#) who writes extensively about the nature of being human. A scientist committed to exposing falsehoods that are so often put forth as basic truths, Fuentes has recently published a new book titled [Race, Monogamy, and Other Lies They Told You: Busting Myths about Human Nature](#).

The Fuentes article was published fifteen years ago in [American Anthropologist](#), the association's flagship journal and the oldest of all AAA publications, currently edited by [Michael Chibnik](#). In "Re-Evaluating Primate Monogamy," Fuentes offers a comprehensive review of the literature and findings on primate monogamy, a behavior pattern that in humans is often conflated with marriage. In this 1998 article, Fuentes was already at work busting myths. He reveals that monogamy is not as common in primates as people generally imagine, and even in humans, a "monogamous social system" does not predominate as a social grouping or mating system. Fuentes warns against viewing monogamy through the lens of "the elusive Western ideal"

because it leads to a kind of impaired vision. We see monogamy when it is not there, and we are blind to the variability, variation, and variety that is, in fact, the hallmark of human and other primate grouping patterns and mating practices.

"The Beginning of Marriage," the second article in our collection, was written for *American Anthropologist* in 1896 by [W.J. McGee](#), the first AAA president. McGee suffered from a major blind spot, revealed on the pages of this essay. For McGee, humankind moved in linear stages from primitive to civilized. Not surprisingly, he assumed his own socio-cultural world was at a more advanced level of human cultural development than the American Indians and other groups whose lifeways he studied. However, in the descriptive material he provides, McGee reveals humankind's enormous capacity for variability in its social arrangements.

McGee introduces his article by quoting scripture, noting the biblical narrative "establishes polygyny and tribal endogamy, demonstrates descent in the male line and wife-purchase by goods or service, indicates marital laws covering concubinage and the order of marriage, defines patriarchy with an inchoate land tenure, and suggests gentile endogamy with some of its consequences" (371-372, emphasis mine). In this one complicated sentence, McGee notes the marriage of one man to several women at the same time (polygyny), a marriage partner selection rule (tribal endogamy), socially recognized links between ancestors and descendants (descent), living together or having a sexual relationships without marriage (concubinage), and the emergence of a gendered social order tied to land rights (patriarchy and land tenure). By implication, we learn from McGee and the Bible a classic anthropological lesson: social and cultural phenomena change as circumstances and conditions change, and no one group has the corner on moral virtue. McGee's portrait demonstrates cross-cultural variation in the forms marriage takes, and suggests these forms link to other social relationships, dynamics, beliefs, and material conditions that must be understood with reference to specific time and place.

Fuentes and McGee provide us a broad frame of reference that allows us to "see" how marriage is a human invention and is enormously variable. From this standpoint, we can also understand that marriage itself is not nor has it ever been the exclusive center of human social arrangement.

Keeping this frame of reference in mind, the third article in the collection offers a way of thinking about the connection between human sexuality and not-so-intimate social forces. The article was published by [Yehudi Cohen](#), a cultural anthropologist at Rutgers University whose research at the time focused on cultural evolution, a framework most contemporary anthropologists do not find useful. Published nearly forty-five years ago in *American Anthropologist* (1969), "Ends and Means in Political Control" discusses the social control of sexuality by the mechanisms of the state — insights that have resonance for our times.

Cohen explains that culture — that elaborate human invention — has produced multiple viewpoints on human sexuality. He writes, "the notion that a culture establishes a single attitude toward sexuality has little empirical support" (674). So how do some people come to believe in "the single attitude"? The anthropologist offers an explanation. "It has long been recognized that controls over sexual behavior are often among the most important means of maintaining political control" (658). Ideologies legitimate authority and get codified by law, Cohen argues; regulating

sexual behavior by means of powerful ideologies is "one of the means to this end," particularly in nation-state systems (658).

The fourth article in our collection by Karl G. Heider is from the very same issue of *American Anthropologist*. [Heider](#) is Carolina Distinguished Professor, Emeritus at the University of South Carolina who has conducted extensive fieldwork in Indonesia and who has been a key figure in the development of the study of visual representation and media.

Like Cohen, Heider also takes a look at law. Specifically, he examines incest laws in the United States, looking for patterns and a common logic across the fifty states of the nation. Heider notes "the right to regulate marriage is implicitly reserved to the individual states by the Tenth Amendment" which explains the occurrence of multiple incest laws in the country (695). Despite that all fifty states are similar in terms of their legislative systems, share a common language and are part of a shared national culture, Heider found "no single statement" when it came to laws regulating incest.

Like McGee, Heider mentions the Bible, but only to show it is rarely invoked in state law. Heider is surprised by the findings of his survey. Considering incest is "such an emotionally-charged behavior," Heider did not expect the extent of variation in state law as he did indeed discover.

Edith Turner is the author of the fifth article in our collection. A self-described "humanistic anthropologist," [Turner](#) is Lecturer of Anthropology at the University of Virginia. Turner published "Girl into Woman" twenty-eight years ago in the journal *Anthropology and Humanism*, a publication of the [Society for Humanistic Anthropology \(SHA\)](#). The SHA journal is now called *Anthropology and Humanism*, and is currently edited by [George Mentore](#).

"Girl into Woman" reads like a story. Recalling Adichie's cautionary note on the danger of the single story, it is important to remember that this is one among many stories that can be told, not a singular representation of Africa, of Central Africa or of the Ndembu, the people with whom Edith Turner and her husband Victor lived and worked for decades.

In just five pages, "Girl into Woman" offers a beautifully intense, moving narrative of a life-cycle ritual. In this case, the ritual prepares and marks the transition of a girl for her future as a sexually mature woman as a member of a particular community. With words and descriptive detail, Turner draws readers into the event. We can almost hear the "gritty plaintive beauty" of the music, almost touch the moist sap of the milk leaves, and almost feel the multiple affective bonds — woman to woman, mother to daughter, women to men, bride to groom. Turner's story leaves the reader with a sense of the person (the girl) who is also part of a whole (the community). The group emotions are in play with the person, the special one who is highlighted on this day. As in any social ritual, all the participants matter.

Edith Turner writes "in a language that opens anthropology to the human subject" words that also describe the [SHA Victor Turner Prize in Ethnographic Writing](#), and Turner's recently published, fascinating memoir titled [Heart of Lightness: The Life Story of an Anthropologist](#) (2006).

About the same time Edith Turner was publishing her memoir, Evelyn Blackwood was preparing her manuscript on "Wedding Bell Blues" (2005), the sixth article in our collection. [Blackwood](#) is Professor of Anthropology at Purdue University, and author of the award winning [Falling into the Lesbi World: Desire and Difference in Indonesia](#). "Wedding Bell Blues" was published in *American Ethnologist* (AE), currently edited by [Angelique Haugerud](#), the journal of the [American Ethnological Society](#) (AES).

At the heart of Blackwood's AE article is a request. Blackwood asks the reader to question deeply entrenched assumptions related to marriage, kinship and other social relations. There is gender bias in these assumptions, Blackwood argues, preconceptions that get filtered into the constructs we have developed and the questions we pose when we examine marriage and family, households and networks of relationships. There is a failure to recognize the ways in which the dominant Western, heterosexual model — what Blackwood calls "the Patriarchal Man" — leads to distorted conclusions about marriage, family and households that do not fit the mold.

Blackwood critically assesses how social scientists talk about and debate "matrifocality" (literally, "mother-centered"). Matrifocality, Blackwood argues, is always presented and understood in terms of deficiency — the missing man, the problems of "weak" marriage, something inferior. The result is "the maligning of [matrifocal] households," Blackwood asserts where there could be a different view. We get caught up in and cry over "the wedding bell blues," when the tears might not be warranted. Acknowledging "the material conditions of women's lives," Blackwood also suggests the configuration of the wedding party may be more complicated, expansive and variable than the heteronormative model allows (14). Drawing on her own fieldwork on Minangkabau (West Sumatra, Indonesia) kin-group relationships, Blackwood illustrates an alternative approach. Rather than assuming "a foundational or universal model for human sociality, intimacy, or relatedness," Blackwood urges we "look for webs of meaningful relationships in their historical and social specificity" (15).

In "Wedding Bell Blues," Blackwood references Princeton University anthropologist [John Borneman](#) who is author of [Syrian Episodes: Sons, Fathers, and an Anthropologist in Aleppo](#). In his AE essay included in our collection, Borneman offers commentary on Blackwood's article, and some amusing, insightful and poignant observations on marriage and other arrangements.

Borneman packs a great deal in his short, four-page essay "Marriage Today" (2005). He offers wry commentary on the state of contemporary US popular culture ("Science is summarily dismissed, and an alternative belief is asserted with no attempt to refute the evidence on which the science is based"), observes that anthropology's neglect of the "nonmarried" has left a gap in our understanding of human sociality, summarizes the place of marriage in relation to descent systems (marriage is put to the service of descent and inheritance, not the other way around), and reminds us that "no form of human affiliation can be explained through individual choice alone. As humans, we make our own history, to paraphrase Marx, but not under conditions that we choose" (30; 33).

And Borneman bluntly states what is truly important about the current state of marriage and its relationship to the state of the world. He writes, "The institution of marriage is simply incapable

of addressing the widespread pauperization of children, who increasingly make up the world's poor and permanent outcasts" (32). Borneman challenges us to take a wider, critical view.

A. Lynn Bolles picks up where Borneman leaves off. [Bolles](#) is Professor of Gender Studies and Anthropology at University of Maryland, College Park. Among her publications, Bolles is author of [Sister Jamaica: A Study of Women, Work, and Households in Kingston](#). Bolles's 2002 article included in our collection was published in [VOICES](#), the journal of the [Association for Feminist Anthropology](#), currently edited by [Amy E. Harper](#).

The starting point for Bolles is not marriage, but poverty. And poverty, she explains, is not an attribute of particular women or of their children, but the consequence of a series of specific actions. Thus the title of her article is "The Impoverishment of Women," words that indicate a process in motion. She offers "a glimpse of the global picture" pointing to key forces driving impoverishment: globalization at the intersection of vulnerability.

Bolles explains globalization as "the foot loose accumulation of capital on a global level" (9). Globalization is not just an abstraction, but a very real set of policies and practices (from deregulation and displacement of indigenous livelihoods to the appropriation of their industries and markets) that render Borneman's children into paupers. Under these conditions, large numbers of people are left out in the cold, becoming what Bolles refers to as "redundant labor." More often than not, those redundant in the economy reside in the most impoverished areas of the world.

"In the twenty-first century, Bolles concludes, "children are starving while the mothers, fathers, kin, neighbors and nations can do little to help them" (12).

Ruth Wilson Gilmore is not so pessimistic. [Gilmore](#) is Professor of Geography in the Earth and Environmental Science Program at the City University of New York, and author of the award-winning book, [Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California](#). Our collection includes Gilmore's 1999 article that appeared in [Transforming Anthropology](#), the journal of the [Association of Black Anthropologists](#), currently co-edited by [Dana-Ain Davis](#) and [Aimee Cox](#).

Gilmore details the real-life struggles of these mothers, fathers, kin and neighbors struggling to protect their children as members of marginalized and impoverished groups. She offers a participant-observer's account of Mothers ROC (Mothers Reclaiming Our Children), a grass-roots activist organization that emerged amidst "crisis-riven 1990s Los Angeles" when a draconian criminal justice system expanded, disproportionately targeting those "redundant in the economy," and as Gilmore explains, put them in cages (14).

In the face of an ever-growing, profitable prison system, a small group of people pushed back, "evidence of how people organize against their abandonment and disposal" (13). The bare fact was that Mother ROC's children were (and are) languishing in those cages. Gilmore was there to document and then tell the powerful story. She writes, "A small, poor, multiracial group of working-class people, mostly prisoners' mothers, mobilize in the interstices of the politically

abandoned, heavily policed, declining welfare state. They come forward, in the first instance, because they will not let their children go" (26).

Michelle A. Marzullo and Gilbert Herdt are co-authors of the final research article included in this collection. [Marzullo](#) is a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at American University and works as a Project Development Associate at SEEDs Alliance. [Herdt](#) is Professor of Sexuality Studies, San Francisco State University, and author of several important books and edited volumes including [21st Century Sexualities : Contemporary Issues in Health, Education, and Rights](#), with Cymene Howe. The article by Marzullo and Herdt appears in [Ethos](#), the journal of the [Society for Psychological Anthropology](#), currently edited by [Edward D. Lowe](#).

Published in 2011, "Marriage Rights and LGBTQ Youth" examines shifting public attitudes towards homosexuality and "gay marriage rights" in the United States. The authors also assess the consequences of these attitudes in relation to the mental health and well being of LGBTQ youth. Its focus on psychological anthropology at the intersection of social policy, the article reviews trend data from public opinions polls conducted in the US, and considers implications of an ethnographic study among youth in Chicago.

The authors note a certain disconnect between American popular opinion and the politics of marriage. On the one hand, opinion polls suggest attitudes are changing, especially among young people in the US, the majority of who support marriage equality. On the other hand, gay marriage (and homosexuality) is subject to political maneuvering. Marzullo and Herdt have identified the pattern: gay marriage is used as a "wedge issue (particularly) in the run up to major elections" (533). It's not about the facts of the matter, the authors argue, nor is it about what the American people think or feel about the issues. It's about the politicization of marriage in the contemporary American scene.

Marzullo and Herdt are most concerned about the consequences of this politicization and the policies that result on the health and wellbeing of youth who are potentially subject to the painful consequences of marginalization. Ethnographic research suggests LGBTQ youth are resilient and more are rejecting "anachronistic views of homosexuality as mental illness, deviance, or an identity leading to isolation and loneliness" (541). The authors conclude on an optimistic note, confident that in the combined effects of cultural shift, growing acceptance of sexual and gendered alternatives, and political activism, LGBTQ youth will thrive.

This collection on "Marriage and Other Arrangements" closes with two book reviews. One is [Anthony F. C. Wallace's](#) informative and entertaining review published in *American Anthropologist* (1969) of [American Kinship: A Cultural Account](#) by [David M. Schneider](#), a classic text in anthropology. The second is [Sonja van Wichelen's](#) 2011 review of [Blue-Ribbon Babies and Labors of Love: Race, Class, and Gender in U.S. Adoption Practice](#), a fascinating book by [Christine Ward Gailey](#) on a contemporary issue. Van Wichelen's review was published in [PoLAR](#), the journal of the [Association of Political and Legal Anthropology](#), and which is currently edited by [John Conley](#) and [Justin Richland](#); [Ilana Gershon](#) is PoLAR's book review editor.

Taken as a whole, the collection offered here is not the definitive word on the topic of marriage. The articles do reveal that marriage can only be understood alongside other subjects and socio-cultural processes: sex, kinship, family, emotion, ideas, ideology, power, politics, class, gender, racialization, law, and inequality, among others. George Bernard Shaw might be right that "There is no subject on which more dangerous nonsense is talked and thought than marriage," though this need not be so. We can turn to anthropology to bring systematic thought and good sense to the conversation.

[Alisse Waterston](#) is Professor, Department of Anthropology at [John Jay College of Criminal Justice](#), City University of New York. She is author of the intimate ethnography, [My Father's Wars: Migration, Memory, and the Violence of a Century](#) (Routledge 2013).

Volume 1, Number 1
April 2013

[Preface: Introducing Open Anthropology](#)

Leith Mullings

[The Editor's Note: Marriage and Other Arrangements](#)

Alisse Waterston

[Re-evaluating Primate Monogamy](#)

Agustin Fuentes – *American Anthropologist*. Vol. 100, Issue 4: 890-907 (1998)
[Read more about this article >](#)

[The Beginning of Marriage](#)

WJ McGee – *American Anthropologist*. Vol. A9, Issue 11: 371-383 (1896)
[Read more about this article >](#)

[Ends and Means in Political Control: State Organization and the Punishment of Adultery, Incest, and Violation of Celibacy](#)

Yehudi A. Cohen – *American Anthropologist*. Vol. 71, Issue 4: 658-687 (1969)
[Read more about this article >](#)

[Anthropological Models of Incest Laws in the United States](#)

Karl G. Heider – *American Anthropologist*. Vol. 71, Issue 4: 693-701 (1969)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Girl Into Woman](#)

Edith Turner – *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly*. Volume 10, Issue 2: 27-32 (1985)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Wedding bell blues: Marriage, missing men, and matrifocal follies](#)

Evelyn Blackwood – *American Ethnologist*. Volume 32, Issue 1: 3-19 (2005)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Marriage Today](#)

John Borneman – *American Ethnologist*. Volume 32, Issue 1: 30-33 (2005)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[The Impoverishment of Women: A Glimpse of the Global Picture](#)

A. Lynn Bolles – *Voices*. Volume 6, Issue 1: 9-13 (2002). Volume 6, Issue 1: 9-13 (2002)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[You Have Dislodged a Boulder: Mothers and Prisoners in the Post Keynesian California Landscape](#)

Ruth Wilson Gilmore – *Transforming Anthropology*. Volume 8, Issue 1-2: 12-38 (2008)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Marriage Rights and LGBTQ Youth: The Present and Future Impact of Sexuality Policy Changes](#)

Michelle A. Marzullo and Gilbert Herdt – *Ethos*. Volume 39, Issue 4: 526-552 (2011).

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Book Review: American Kinship: A Cultural Account by David M. Schneider](#)

Anthony F.C. Wallace – *American Anthropologist*. Vol. 71, Issue 1: 100-106 (1969)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Book Review: Blue-Ribbon Babies and Labors of Love: Race, Class, and Gender in U.S. Adoption Practice by Christine Ward Gailey](#)

Sonja Van Wichelen – *PoLAR*. Vol. 34, Issue 1: 201-204 (2011)

[Read more about this article >](#)

[Update to *Marriage and Other Arrangements*](#)

In the spring of 2013, marriage made headline news with the US Supreme Court rulings on the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and California's Proposition 8. AAA and several anthropologists weighed in on the issue with a press release, several op-eds and an important chapter in a newly released book. The information, ideas and insights in these publications offer a wonderful, up-to-date complement to the themes and articles in the first issue of *Open Anthropology* on "Marriage and Other Arrangements."

* Roger Lancaster (George Mason University): "Marriage Is Not a Timeless, Unchanging Institution" in [The Meaning of Matrimony: Debating Same-Sex Marriage](#), June, 2013. London: Civitas: Institute for the Study of Civil Society.

* Ellen Lewin (University of Iowa), 5.13.2013: [Baby Steps](#), *Huffington Post*.

* Christa Craven (College of Wooster) and Dana-Ain Davis (Queens College), 6.26.2013: Equity at the Peril of Normativity: [A Feminist Anthropological Take on Race, Marriage and Justice](#), *The Feminist Wire*

* Rosemary Joyce (U California-Berkeley), 6.27.2013: [DOMA, Prop.8 and Marriage: An Anthropologist's View](#), *Los Angeles Times*

* Tom Boellstorff (U California-Irvine), 6.28.2013: [Four Anthropological Reactions to the End of DOMA](#), *Huffington Post*.

* Michelle Marzullo (American U), 7.03.2013: [If the Entire Human Race Had a Facebook Page, The Relationship Status Would Read "It's Complicated"](#), *Huffington Post*.