Open Anthropology Matters

The Editors’ Note: Open Anthropology Matters
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For this issue of Open Anthropology we are promoting material linked to the 2017 annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), Anthropology Matters. From a potentially enormous selection of themes, we’re particularly highlighting work by the keynote speakers, Paul Farmer and Jim Yong Kim. We are also using this opportunity to showcase the efforts of outgoing AAA President Alisse Waterston, who was the founding first editor of Open Anthropology.

Open Anthropology is a public effort of the AAA, and so we concentrated on the Executive Sessions with the theme of Anthropological Knowledge Creation/Dissemination. Since we began editing Open Anthropology, we have tried to feature articles that are useful in teaching—both teaching anthropology and allied endeavors. Within the category of Anthropological Knowledge Creation/Dissemination, we focused on the session titled Why Anthropology Matters: Making Anthropology Relevant and Engaging a Larger Public Audience through Pedagogy. Additionally within the category of Anthropological Knowledge Creation/Dissemination is the perhaps provocatively titled Do Black and Brown Lives Matter to Anthropology?: Race, Bodies, and Context. This roundtable is relevant both to anthropology and pedagogy, and for this issue we’ve included articles from several of the presenters.

We begin with Deprovincializing Trump, Decolonizing Diversity, and Unsettling Anthropology as a frame for anthropology’s current possible contribution. This invited commentary by Jonathan Rosa and Yarimar Bonilla appears in the May 2017 issue of American Ethnologist. In some ways this may be seen as an update and companion piece to their previous “#Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the
United States” which also was published in American Ethnologist (February 2015) and was included in the Open Anthropology issue on Race, Racism, and Protesting Anthropology. In their “Deprovincializing Trump” reflections, Rosa and Bonilla “share the general concern over the impact of [Trump’s] win, and believe that anthropology can and should play a critical role in examining the importance of this moment.” However, they “contend that there is just as much to be learned from the reactions to the election as there is from the results” (201). Rosa and Bonilla resist the urge to see recent events as a definitive or exceptional break from the past. “The characterization of Trump’s election, as well as related global events such as Brexit, as exceptional effectively delinks present-day racism from colonial histories of power, disavows US settler colonialism, and silences critiques of global coloniality” (203).

As an introduction and framing statement, Rosa and Bonilla provide a useful overview of anthropology’s history and missed potential, as well as a warning about too-quickly assuming that anthropology will automatically matter.

Current calls to make anthropology “matter” are certainly welcome, but they must be accompanied by a critical assessment of our disciplinary orientation, epistemic ground, and collective purpose. The study of human diversity makes little sense unless it can explain how difference and diversity are produced, why diversity is imagined as a hierarchy, and how that hierarchy is replicated and maintained. (205)

Rosa and Bonilla conclude their commentary with a stirring call-to-action which might realize anthropology’s potential. “We believe that deprovincializing contemporary US articulations of power, decolonizing diversity, and unsettling the colonial logics of the academy might help us connect two crucial tasks: interrogating long-standing power formations and imagining new worlds” (206).

Our second selection is by Alisse Waterston and Antigona Kukaj from the September 2007 American Anthropologist. Waterston and Kukaj provide Reflections on Teaching Social Violence in an Age of Genocide and a Time of War, a dialogue between a teacher and a student. Waterston and Kukaj open by drawing specifically on Paul Farmer’s work in his 2003 book Pathologies of Power (discussed in the next section). “We find structural violence to be a useful theoretical concept for identifying the specific ways in which social violence is grounded in the ‘pathologies of power’ and for noting how various forms of social violence are linked or have common features” (509). Their article highlights teaching as political and anthropological practice. Waterston begins her reflection by explaining how she revamped a course on “Culture and Crime” to respond to contemporary challenges. Drawing on Paulo Freire, my purpose as a teacher is to help draw connections between these seemingly disparate events, to explore the ways in which social facts are rooted in structural inequalities, to locate actors and actions in fields of power that are marked by asymmetry, and to help show that what seems aberrant has systemic roots. With these ideas and fragments of information in mind, the course began to take shape as a student-centered and critical “co-investigation” (students and teacher) of systemic violence. (511)
For Kukaj “this course helped me grasp a new heightened awareness about violence that other courses dealing with such issues did not. Learning about institutionalized forms of violence and injustice forced me to think about violence in ways I had not previously examined or questioned” (512). Their article includes exercises and examples from the course itself, as well as an analysis of possible shortcomings. In the end, Waterston and Kukaj “believe that infusing an undergraduate course entitled ‘Culture and Crime’ with this unexpected subject matter and with innovative techniques brings a dimension of relevance to the study of anthropology at the undergraduate level” (515).

Following on Waterston and Kukaj, we are able to provide here an excerpt from Paul Farmer’s Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor (2003, University of California Press). This excerpt appears in the June 2003 issue of North American Dialogue, and begins with Farmer’s conceptualization of structural violence:

For well over a decade, I have grappled, as have many others, with conditions that could only be described as violent—at least to those who must endure them. In this book, as elsewhere, I use the term "structural violence" as a broad rubric that includes a host of offenses against human dignity: extreme and relative poverty, social inequalities ranging from racism to gender inequality, and the more spectacular forms of violence that are uncontestedly human rights abuses, some of them punishment for efforts to escape structural violence. (1)

The brief excerpt concentrates on the Mexican state of Chiapas. Farmer uses the example to draw broader lessons about health and how people seek to claim basic human rights: “Although we’re often told that we live in a time of limited resources, the numbers suggest that, to the contrary, we live in a time of unprecedented wealth. If Chiapas has a lesson for the rest of the world, it’s that the world’s resources must be more evenly shared” (4).

Continuing with the work of Paul Farmer is a book review essay by Craig R. Janes in Medical Anthropology Quarterly (December 2014). Janes reviews Reimagining Global Health: An Introduction, edited by Paul Farmer, Jim Yong Kim, Arthur Kleinman, and Matthew Basilico, together with When People Come First: Critical Studies in Global Health edited by João Biehl and Adriana Petryna. Janes begins by noting the current interest and implications for teaching. “Driven by complex motivations—moral outrage at yawning social and health inequities, a desire to help, or just to travel abroad with a purpose—this new generation is flocking to courses and programs in global health” (b11). Janes finds Reimagining Global Health to be “an introductory textbook of global health, intended mainly for non-specialists” (b11) featuring the extensive use of case studies, and for the most part conveying a “message of hope” (b12).

However, Janes also notes that “regrettably absent is any attention to the health consequences of environmental degradation and climate change, which many now recognize as the most dangerous threats to human health globally” (b13). In this sense, When People Come First might be considered a “very useful companion” for Reimagining Global Health: “I have found that the
two volumes are usefully combined: They interrogate one another, and in so doing evoke useful and productive discussion. The books will also be useful to anyone interested in understanding the history and current deployment of global health” (b15).

Next up are a pair of articles featuring anthropological engagement with Detroit. First is the contribution by Aimee Cox which appears in the April 2009 volume of Transforming Anthropology. In The BlackLight Project and Public Scholarship: Young Black Women Perform against and through the Boundaries of Anthropology, Cox uses “an arts-based social justice project that emerged from the shelter, as the frame to consider several tensions within public anthropology” (51). More specifically:

My work as an urban anthropologist over the last decade with socially conscious youth, such as the young women of BlackLight in Detroit, has raised many questions for me regarding the meaning and utility (both in terms of usefulness and how it is strategically put to use) of public anthropology. While I am excited by the rich possibilities within a truly socially engaged and accountable anthropology, I am also wary of the potential pitfalls and marginalizing forces that may surface as the idea of public anthropology gains more legitimacy and, therefore, more mainstream marketability in and beyond the academy. (52)

While for Cox “public anthropology has the potential to aggressively challenge hierarchies of knowledge production” there is a great concern “that what might now make public anthropology ‘hot’ could be determined by a definition of the public that does not extend to economically challenged communities of color in the United States, or only includes these communities as objects of study” (53).

And indeed, when we look back at how public anthropology was “hot” in 2009, it may give pause with regard to anthropology’s contemporary trajectory. Anticipating a similar call from Rosa and Bonilla in 2017 who urge anthropologists to be “willing to question the primacy of anthropological epistemologies” (206), Cox in 2009 stressed a need for alliances with interdisciplinary programs such as women and gender, African American, Latin American, Asian and Asian Pacific Islander, and Arab American studies. These scholar activists are keenly aware of the vulnerability that comes with occupying liminal spaces, and in spite of, or perhaps, more accurately because of, this precariousness must continue to work and write in opposition. (63)

The second in the pair of articles set in Detroit is Engaging Opportunities in Urban Revitalization: Practicing Detroit Anthropology which appears in the May 2013 Annals of Anthropological Practice. The article was part of a special issue of Annals on Anthropology and the Engaged University: New Vision for the Discipline within Higher Education. Authors Sherylyn Briller and Andrea Sankar consider the role of Wayne State University (WSU) to Detroit and the Anthropology of the City program. The WSU Anthropology Department “is ideally situated to engage in synergistic relationships with community partners and train students to become globally aware and locally engaged citizens. Our department strives to produce graduates who can work in a theoretically sophisticated and practical fashion to create new knowledge and promote positive social change in Detroit and
beyond via engaged scholarship” (156-57). WSU is considered a “university of opportunity” and has an “extremely diverse student body” (159); within WSU, the Anthropology Department emphasizes four-field community-engaged work (161). Like Cox, Briller and Sankar stress the “importance of interdisciplinary collaboration” (166). Briller and Sankar here recount a history of engagement as well as sketch new opportunities for transforming education—including a rethinking of the anthropology doctorate. Their concluding recommendations:

Going forward, it will be essential to think more deeply about how to anthropologically engage with global and local urban problems in a theoretically sophisticated and practical fashion. We must foster further collaboration between academics and community partners to achieve common goals and build effective lasting partnerships. As we use a community-engaged approach in developing new projects, we will need to publish and speak about what we are doing in anthropological, related disciplinary, problem-focused, and public-oriented venues. We will need to be open to how collaboration, research, and education can be done differently and better in the future; we all have a stake in the success of this undertaking. (174-75)

Audrey Ricke’s 2017 article in The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology shifts focus to “Festa Pomerana,” a German festival in Pomerode, Brazil. In Producing the Middle Class: Domestic Tourism, Ethnic Roots, and Class Routes in Brazil Ricke “highlights the role of domestic tourism in the construction of middle-class identity in less urban regions of Latin America and its interplay with middle-class identity in larger urban spaces” (1-2). Festa Pomerana, advertised as “the most German festival in Brazil” offers a convergence of “ethnic roots” which can then be consumed as a “route” of mobility to middle-class standing (3). Ricke’s account provides an interesting counterpoint to the typical rural-to-urban mobility stories that once may have characterized cities in the Americas (including Detroit). “Instead of a rural to urban movement that often characterizes aspirations for class mobility in Latin America, this work examines the reverse: temporary movement from urban to rural areas for domestic tourism and how this influences the production of middle-class identity” (5). The location of the festival makes it possible for Brazilians to share a feel and taste of European travel, a desired but often inaccessible goal. And the “ethnic roots” in Germany carry meaning:

Part of the connection between the social characteristics of being middle class and being German-Brazilian has to do with race, and particularly the social meanings attached to whiteness. Implicitly intertwined in the correlation between German immigrants’ rooting of their traditions—that is, their school systems and industry—and middle-class routes of education and hard work, is an association with whiteness. Since whiteness in Brazil is linked to education and modernity, the route running to and from German ethnicity and middle-classdom is smoother because there is no perceived social disjuncture, past or present. (15)

While the role of anthropology in analyzing international tourism has been prominent, Ricke’s article uncovers a role for anthropology in the perhaps less-glamorized and under-studied field of domestic tourism. “With domestic tourism being turned to as one form of economic development
in the global South, it is essential to assess not just the economic benefits that it actually brings to locals, but also the role it plays in the construction of a middle-class collective” (18).

An article by Ian Skoggard and Alisse Waterston in the Anthropology of Consciousness (Fall 2015) turns our attention to the doing and writing of ethnography. Skoggard and Waterston penned an introductory essay, Toward an Anthropology of Affect and Evocative Ethnography: A growing interest in affect holds much promise for anthropology by providing a new frame to examine and articulate subjective and intersubjective states, which are key parts of human consciousness and behavior. . . . However, the challenge for ethnographers has always been to articulate in words and conceptualize theoretically what is only felt and sensed. (109)

As they introduce the articles in this special issue of the Anthropology of Consciousness, Skoggard and Waterston say they are “both pleased and worried about the ‘turn’ in anthropology and related fields to a relatively new focus on ‘affect,’ a term that itself has multiple meanings and is difficult to define, identify, and pinpoint” (111). They are pleased by a focus on feelings and ideas of “collective affect,” which they connect to Durkheim, but worried that the presentation as a new field might erase previous anthropological efforts (hence the connection to Durkheim and early anthropology). “We anthropologists have probably set ourselves up for the impossible: to capture lived experience, emotionality, and perception; small and large-scale interactivity; intimacy; and sociality, power, politics, and ever-changing material conditions of social life without reducing one to the other—and portraying all of it in narrative form” (117).

Paul Stoller has long been attempting to do this impossible task of conveying through narrative form an understanding of affect and lived experience while not losing sight of power and politics. Stoller is an ideal reviewer for Alisse Waterston’s attempt to capture all this in My Father’s Wars: Migration, Memory, and the Violence of a Century. Stoller’s review appears in the November 2014 issue of American Ethnologist. Stoller reports that unlike others who have mostly “talked the talk” about “narrative evocations of anthropological issues,” Waterston has successfully produced a narrative evocation: “Simply stated, My Father’s Wars is a historically informed memoir on how the wars of the last century shaped the social, economic, and emotional life of one man, Michael Waterston, who fled Poland, landed in Cuba, and, eventually, made his way to New York City” (776). It is a story of power, politics, and large-scale war; but also of individual contingency. My Father’s Wars “is a riveting and uplifting memoir that unleashes the evocative power of anthropological storytelling—a testament to the unexpectedly wondrous human capacity for resilience” (776).

On Moving Words continues the theme of how best to harness anthropology’s evocative power. In this editorial written for the April 2013 issue of Transforming Anthropology, Aimee Cox and Dana-Ain Davis argue that “paying attention to how, where, and why words move requires we examine the politics of knowledge production” (1). This observation leads to reflections about the role of online words, such as blog-posts, in relationship to more traditional peer-reviewed scholarship. “The entire field of anthropology, similar to all other disciplines, has
been wrestling for a while now with how to establish a relevant presence in the major debates that take place in our world while influencing the very real material consequences and ethical dilemmas they pose” (2). As they introduce the articles in this issue of *Transforming Anthropology*, Cox and Davis draw attention to Lynn Bolles work on citation: “Bolles makes visible the processes of exclusion in a practice so necessary and common place in our work it has almost become unremarkable: citing” (2). Bolles’s article *Telling the Story Straight: Black Feminist Intellectual Thought in Anthropology* “offers an unapologetic rigorous critique that exemplifies how the discipline should and must proceed in regards to addressing conflicts that push all anthropologists to work toward greater relevance, inclusion, and accountability” (3). (Note that Bolles’s article also appeared in a previous issue of *Open Anthropology on Race, Racism, and Protesting Anthropology*.)

John L. Jackson, Jr. furthers the inquiry into the possible new role of the digital. Jackson’s August 2012 article in *Cultural Anthropology*, *Ethnography Is, Ethnography Ain’t* “argues that there is something about the nonlinearities defining digitality's difference that might help us to think about recalibrations in the ethnographic project itself” (495). Jackson also takes us into film and a consideration of why “ethnographic films aren’t nearly given the same weighty significance as books or articles in most academic contexts” (482). His purpose is to reflect on changes in life and anthropological practice:

I intend this brief article to evoke some of the ways in which we might construct a productive conversation about reconfigurations of ethnographic time and space through digitality and its varied deployments. Indeed, all I want to highlight here is a simple (although somewhat controversial) claim that “the Diasporic” and “the ethnographic” have, in a sense, gone “digital” as advanced modalities of mass mediatization create and re-create forms of sociality and even intimacy that demand and reward critical attention. (484)

Using fascinating examples from his research with the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem, and a lecture he gave in California regarding this research, Jackson asks us to consider how the digital may be reshaping ethnography. “Digitality’s bending of time and space recalibrates the dyadic relationship that serves as centerpiece and pivot point for the entire ethnographic encounter” (495).

Of course, perhaps no other anthropologist has been as prominent in a promotion of digitality as Michael Wesch, especially with regard to pedagogy. Willow Scobie provides a review of Wesch’s “Anthropological Introduction to YouTube.” Scobie’s review is in the December 2011 issue of *American Anthropologist*. Scobie notes that the viral video “simultaneously is about and has become a part of the social fabric of YouTube,” and then focuses on four aspects: “YouTube as a research site, YouTube as a platform for self-expression, YouTube’s capacity to foster community building, and finally YouTube’s role in identity formation” (661). In the end, Scobie is skeptical about YouTube in community building and especially skeptical with regard to forming new identities; perhaps Jackson’s wording of “recalibrates” might be most appropriate. Scobie writes that Wesch “is strongest when he argues that media mediate rather than change our
identities. Wesch is most convincing when he walks us through this landscape and avoids a technologically deterministic argument. Clearly, this is an important social space that warrants further research” (661).

Our concluding three articles are all taken from recent issues of the Journal of Linguistic Anthropology, highlighting innovative research in this subfield. First is Hilary Parsons Dick who reviews Homegirls: Language and Cultural Practice among Latina Youth Gangs by Norma Mendoza-Denton. Although the review appears in the August 2012 issue of the Journal of Linguistic Anthropology, the first sentence is perhaps even more applicable to 2017: “The United States is again in a cycle of public debate in which Latin American immigration is the subject of a moral panic that decries this immigration as inherently dangerous and corrupting” (E108). In this context, Dick writes that Homegirls “provides a critical correction to the ways that the penalization of unauthorized immigration criminalizes and racializes Latin American immigrants and U.S. Latino/as” (E108). While Mendoza-Denton examines resistance to this penalization, Dick asks if this resistance may exacerbate the issues. “This resistance raises questions about the complex ways gang life may also work to reinscribe the youths’ presumed criminality. I wonder if one might find among Mendoza-Denton’s research participants similar patterns and trajectories found among the youth in Willis’s classic Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs” (E109). (Note that Elizabeth Chin’s Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture precisely used Willis’s framework to analyze dehumanization and resistance in consumption spaces.) In general, Dick finds Homegirls to be an important contribution: “Mendoza-Denton’s transnational perspective on race is much too absent from studies of immigration, and it makes a welcome addition, generating a book that uncovers new facets of immigration politics, youth culture, race relations and nationalism, and the central role that language practices play in all of these processes” (E111).

Norma Mendoza-Denton is the author of the next article, The Semiotic Hitchhiker's Guide to Creaky Voice: Circulation and Gendered Hardcore in a Chicana/o Gang Persona. Published in December 2011, the article follows upon Mendoza-Denton’s 2008 book Homegirls, and incorporates multiple data sets for its analysis. Mendoza-Denton, drawing on Jane Hill, Elinor Ochs, and Penelope Eckert, explains the metaphor of hitchhiking: “In the case of creaky voice, we will see that it is catapulted from a speech modality that is arguably local to California in its ethnic/gender configuration, and is propelled through a media explosion to a recognizable, unregistered, marketable product that has hitchhiked on the backs of sales of millions of units of videogame DVDs” (263). After analyzing the linguistic features of creaky voice, Mendoza-Denton explains its local particularities:

Creaky voice assists gang girls in the construction of a hardcore persona in the context of a locally-defined economy of affect, where close metalinguistic attention is paid to the management of emotional responses displayed in a given situation. Here, the local definition of the meaning of this feature is crucial: it is the local nature of creak’s interpretation that allows it to serve as a female-marked feature in some communities and a male-marked feature in others, and to switch from denoting a specific kind of locally-determined femininity (feminine
toughness) in the first data set, only to be transformed to cholo masculinity in just a few generations of intertextual serialization. (266)

However, these local meanings become mediatized and widely circulated via music and YouTube, reminiscent of Jackson and Wesch (above), and resulting in a masculinization of the speech feature. “It is in its circulation into outsider genres that the ‘hardcore’ quality of creak becomes enregistered as a higher-order index of masculinity, in part because these videogame characters are dominated by men and fictional male characters and avatars” (275). In conclusion, Mendoza-Denton remarks that there is nothing linguistically inherent about this association, but “presumably one reason why indirect indexicality (Chicano gangster speech is not just masculine but macho and sexist) emerges in the mediatized personae is that cholos/gangsters are perceived to push the boundaries of behavior usually stereotyped as being masculine: violence, trouble-making, and ‘dangerous’ unpredictable behavior” (275-76).

Our final selection is by Jonathan Rosa, whose co-written piece with Yarimar Bonilla opened this issue. **Standardization, Racialization, Languagelessness: Raciolinguistic Ideologies across Communicative Contexts** is in the August 2016 *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. Rosa makes an important point that goes beyond a simple criticism of non-standard language varieties. “Whereas ideologies of language standardization stigmatize particular linguistic practices understood to deviate from prescriptive norms, ideologies of languagelessness call into question linguistic competence—and, by extension, legitimate personhood—altogether” (162). Rosa shows “how ideologies of language standardization and languagelessness interact with one another, and how assessments of particular individuals’ language use often invoke broader ideas about the (in)competence and (il)legitimacy of entire racialized groups” (163-64).

Rosa’s article should be a wake-up call to anyone who believed a message of linguistic or cultural relativism—that other languages and cultures are simply different but not inferior—had won the day. We are in a quite scary other place. In one troubling portion of the article, Rosa demonstrates how the idea of “bilingualism” has been redefined:

Bilingualism was not merely devalued in this context—it was completely inverted. “Bilingual” students’ language skills were measured only in relation to their purported limited English proficiency; there was no formal way in which their Spanish language abilities were recognized as academically useful. To be bilingual was not to use more than one language; it was to use less than one language in particular. Since these “bilingual” students’ language use was not perceived as corresponding to standardized written English, they were understood as not knowing any legitimate language at all. (169)

Of course, these language ideologies are reminiscent of the colonization of the Americas, which Rosa points out in his conclusion. “Ideologies of languagelessness have manifested themselves in many other contexts, from the onset of colonial contact between Europe and the Americas, in which indigenous populations were figured as having ‘no language at all’” (177). The durability of these ideas speak to the “powerfully entrenched nature of the relationship between ideologies
of standardization and languagelessness on the one hand, and the anchoring of these ideologies in longstanding processes of racialization on the other” (177).

The annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association are always exciting and interesting. We hope in opening these articles to show how Anthropology Matters beyond the meetings of anthropologists. The work of enlarging the context of anthropology is for anthropologists in collaboration with many others. In the coming years we must connect the two crucial tasks that Rosa and Bonilla identify in their introductory commentary: “interrogating long-standing power formations and imagining new worlds” (206).

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