



# Open Anthropology

A PUBLIC JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

## Valuing Alternative Narratives of Humanity's Past, Present, and Future

Volume 9, Issue 3

November 2021

[Michael C. Ennis-McMillan](#), Skidmore College

[Cathy Lynne Costin](#), California State University, Northridge

Anthropologists soon will gather—in person and virtually—for the annual conference of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in Baltimore, Maryland. This year's theme, "[Truth and Responsibility](#)," invites anthropologists to share insights on humanity, especially "truths in patterns of human behavior, language, evolution, and cultural worlds". This issue of *Open Anthropology* offers a prelude to conference conversations about multiple and pluralistic truths that anthropologists learn when delving into past and present societies. As happens at every anthropology conference, scholars and practitioners will debate and evaluate the meaning of these truths and their connection to discernible patterns of human lifeways. The scholarly exchanges promise to challenge and deepen current understandings of what it means to be human.

This year's conference theme especially prompts us to highlight anthropological accounts that address coexisting and conflicting narratives about major public issues, including pandemics, climate change, racism, language justice, and varying accounts of the past. In this essay, we explore how anthropological approaches help evaluate multiple kinds of knowledge and perspectives of humanity. Like many scientists, anthropologists face the challenge of communicating in complex multimedia contexts that too often circulate intentionally misleading and harmful representations about diverse people and places. Valuing human diversity, anthropologists increasingly encounter blustery claims about factuality and fabrication regarding fundamental issues facing humanity. In a contentious public terrain, how do anthropological ways of knowing deliver trustworthy guidance? The selected authors in this issue speak to this question by examining a range of human concerns. In compelling ways, these anthropologists amplify narratives of diverse realities, past and present, that act as powerful counterweights to falsities if not delusions that occupy too much of the current public space.

## COVID-19 inequalities

Anthropologists have responded in numerous ways to the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on anthropological lessons about HIV/AIDS, SARS, Ebola, and other emerging diseases. Many articles are already publicly available for developing effective pandemic interventions, and an earlier issue of *Open Anthropology* surveyed anthropological perspectives on emerging diseases that can guide COVID-19 responses ([Ennis-McMillan and Hedges 2020](#)). Indeed, anthropologists have rapidly marshalled facts to challenge harmful fabrications, especially baseless claims and foolish actions that risk prolonging the pandemic.

Most significantly, anthropologists have sought to counter cultural patterns that perpetuate socially produced sickness and death during pandemics. As one example, Yesmar Oyarzun ([2020](#)) analyzes the pathology of preexisting racist discourse and practices that influence pandemic responses. Recounting her experiences volunteering at a COVID-19 testing site in southeast Texas, Oyarzun explores the deep cultural patterns associated with slavery, racism, and capitalism that shape COVID-19 identification and treatment in the United States. She describes her situation as a Black woman working with Black healthcare workers who were activated for emergency duty. Oyarzun shows how preexisting racist narratives, grounded in a pervasive plantation mentality, intensified suffering of her colleagues at the testing center. Working long, hard hours in the heat, trying to serve on the front lines of the pandemic, Oyarzun recounts the psychological and physical harms to those seeking COVID-19 tests as well as those doing the testing. Recognizing and dismantling plantation cultural frameworks is essential for easing the suffering generated by new infections as well as by healthcare interventions meant to prevent, detect, and treat those infections. Oyarzun's experience demonstrates the need for publicly engaged anthropologists to counter entrenched cultural illusions that intensify suffering during a pandemic.

## Climate change responses

Concerns about limiting environmental destruction linked to carbon emissions span every locale where humans grapple with dynamic and changing ecological systems. Critics of climate change research, however, seize on the open-ended nature of scientific inquiry, particularly the process of considering new facts that can lead to revised understandings of the risks of environmental destruction. Critics offer distorted views of scientific reports of potential climate change outcomes in order to question the reality of human-induced ecosystem destruction. Spinning competing narratives about what is true and false about climate change becomes a powerful means of avoiding reductions in carbon emissions and stalling other responses to humanity's looming global catastrophe.

In this global discussion, anthropology offers insightful alternative sources of climate change knowledge and action. The [2015 AAA Statement on Humanity and Climate Change](#) states, "climate change is not a natural problem, it is a human problem." Anthropologists regularly point out that people in out-of-the-way places who are least responsible for producing climate

change are some of the people most intensely facing immediate disastrous effects. Nevertheless, many vulnerable communities challenge dominant narratives of inevitable and apocalyptic consequences. Instead, indigenous people mobilize local cultural frameworks and methods to build resilient and collaborative solutions. Anthropologists listen to local narratives and share local experiences more broadly to develop collaborative and effective climate change responses. The patterns of culturally diverse climate change responses point to powerful solutions that bypass spurious debates about whether climate change is true or not.

For instance, Stuart Kirsch ([2020](#)) notes how politicians and activists from Pacific Islands use local values and conceptions to guide international climate change efforts. Pacific Islanders reject outside assumptions that rising sea levels signal an inevitable displacement of island communities. Instead, they mobilize ideas and practices across three Pacific regions to safeguard the global climate. They refuse to see themselves as climate change refugees, not only to save themselves but the world. Marshallese, for example, helped pressure stakeholders to lower fossil-fuel emissions during the Paris Climate Agreement. Fijians have drawn on a notion of *talanoa*, which involves building open, trustworthy communication to arrive at common responses to mutual problems. Talanoa Dialogues, as an institutionalized environmental practice, create cooperative responses that benefit everyone, not just Fijians. Similarly, the Solomon Islanders seek to enhance adaptive responses by developing new models for integrating local environmental knowledge with scientific methods. Kirsch demonstrates that indigenous perspectives and practices foster meaningful climate change responses and enhance adaptability for all of Earth's inhabitants.

Similarly, in the Andes, Matthew Sayre, Tammy Stenner, and Alejandro Argumedo ([2017](#)) report how Quechua farmers collaborate with scientists to develop the Potato Park and other strategies to limit the harmful impacts of climate change. The Andean farmers address the realities they directly witness, including retreating glaciers, water scarcity, warmer air and soil temperatures, and movement of species across transformed ecological zones. Farmers rely on indigenous methods to cultivate potatoes and other crops in a changing environment. As the authors note, "Andean cosmovision, customary laws, and a rich traditional knowledge of place and of wild and cultivated species are embodied in the Quechua language, which is still used to pass cultural practices and agricultural knowledge on to future generations" (p. 101). Like Pacific Islanders, the Andean farmers collaborate with anthropologists and other scientists to integrate indigenous knowledge and practices with scientific methods. The respect for *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) along with creative and collaborative responses provide resilient global solutions to food security and other conditions required for a healthier and just world.

Among pastoralists in northeastern Siberia, Susan Alexandra Crate ([2021](#)) explores stories of climate change and the emotional impact of witnessing firsthand the loss of habitat and livelihoods when permafrost ecosystems thaw, plants and animals die, and people face dislocation. As in the cases above, Sakha people consider physical and spiritual factors as they develop new adaptive responses. Communities connect their heritage and spirituality to *alaas*, a particular ecosystem in the area. The cultural meaning of *alaa* relates to homeland and birthplace

as well as a place where ancestors dwell. Crate documents how local cultural conceptions of human-environment interactions underscore the reality of climate change. Listening to people experiencing the truth of climate change in a place like Siberia prompts anthropologists to consider how to advance culturally, ethically, and scientifically sound policies.

### **Racism and health inequalities**

Race, cast as a biological-based human group, has long been an erroneous concept used to describe human difference, including in anthropology's not-so-distant past. Contemporary anthropologists, however, have worked for decades to establish steadfastly that biologically-defined races as imagined in popular conceptualizations do not exist. Rather, anthropology has made clear that the complexity of human genetic variation defies categorizing people into distinct groups (see the [1998 AAA Statement on Race](#)). Indeed, surveying human variation among groups across the globe, anthropologists recognize that humans are more alike genetically than they are different. In confronting the fallacy that biologically-defined races exist, anthropologists also acknowledge that race is a social construct that supports, and is supported by, racism and violent hierarchical social organizations. In other words, contemporary anthropology recognizes two interrelated facts: biologically-defined races do not exist, and race as a social concept does exist and generates diverse forms of racism. Furthermore, the unhealthy and violent harms of racism are consequential truths that many anthropologists increasingly take responsibility to address.

When she was president of the American Anthropological Association, Leith Mullings supported the launching of *Open Anthropology*. In her preface to the inaugural issue, Mullings ([2013](#)) remarked that a public journal could highlight the anthropological perspective that “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.” Her commitment to describe how racialized groups came to be informs many anthropological challenges to persistent racism as well as calls for anti-racist activism and social change, issues explored by Jason Antrosio and Sallie Han in “The Editors’ Note: Race, Racism, and Protesting Anthropology” in *Open Anthropology* ([2015](#)).

Recent anthropological discussions of the realities of racism have highlighted how the violence directed at racialized groups creates identifiable patterns of suffering. Last year, shortly before her death, Leith Mullings exchanged views on the biological consequences of racism with Jada Benn Torres, Agustín Fuentes, Clarence C. Gravlee, Dorothy Roberts, and Zaneta Thayer ([Mullings et al. 2021](#)). Mullings’ opening statement frames the discussion: “race not only does not exist in nature but is created by organized groups for their benefit” (p. 6). Dominant social groups deploying racist ideologies structure unequal and inadequate access to essential resources, including food, water, healthcare, secure housing, and safe communities and workplaces. Applying a holistic framework, Mullings and her colleagues place anthropology in conversation with epidemiology, neuroscience, genetics, evolution, and medicine. They note, for example, that many early public discussions of unequal patterns of COVID-19 included medical professionals

as well as mainstream and social media quick to draw on false ideas that racialized genetic differences might account for differential risk of infection. Mullings and her colleagues, however, emphasize that the pandemic is a telling example of how systemic racism is a major risk factor for COVID-19 morbidity and mortality. Structural violence perpetuates health inequalities, which dominant social groups mischaracterize as racial differences that, in turn, validate their racist misconceptions that informed the structural violence. In contrast, anthropological perspectives interrupt this distorted circular reasoning and its harmful consequences.

Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe along with Jennifer K. Wagner, Joon-Ho Yu, Tanya M. Harrell, Michael J. Bamshad, and Charmaine D. Royal ([2017](#)) surveyed anthropologists on their views of the race concept. They report that anthropologists broadly support the idea that race is a social construct and not a “scientifically reliable measure of human genetic variation” (p. 427). They also state that anthropologists increasingly recognize the need to address the ambiguity of saying that biologically-defined races do not exist while also stating the social reality that race concepts and racist practices “are informed by and inform biology” (p. 423). To resolve this ambiguity and effectively counter racism, anthropologists increasingly challenge the mischaracterization of human genetics as well as health inequalities used to uphold the validity of racial classifications. Anthropologists also increasingly document how racial classifications have pathophysiological outcomes, such as the way people embody racism with health disparities—related to lack of basic resources, healthcare, and safe communities. Ifekwunigwe and her colleagues demonstrate that building a truly antiracist anthropology requires exposing misguided constructions of human differences as well as the consequent health disparities and inequalities. In this way, contemporary anthropological perspectives about racism “moves us closer as a society to righting many of the social injustices that continue to plague our nation” (p. 430).

Anthropologists have documented diverse ways that the social construction of racialized groups has led to harmful consequences. As a recent example, Antonio José Bacelar da Silva and Erika Robb Larkins ([2019](#)) examine how anti-Black racism and violence in Brazil intensified in relation to Jair Bolsonaro’s 2018 presidential election. Tapping into and encouraging overt anti-Black racism allowed Bolsonaro, a right-wing candidate, to mobilize broad electoral support to gain the presidency. Once in office, he quickly overturned policies to address race-based discrimination, using a racist ideology that purportedly treated all Brazilians the same. This rhetoric of equality “ignored the very well-documented racial disparities in Brazil and the power to shape the lives of Afro-Brazilians” (p. 899). As Bolsonaro denied that racial differences matter, his supporters ironically accused those who opposed racial discrimination of dividing the country, which encouraged more racist rhetoric and anti-Blackness violence. In a paradoxical fashion, Bolsonaro popularized a narrative that racial differences do not matter in a way that increased violence and oppression, especially toward those protesting racialized inequalities. Bacelar da Silva and Larkins recount in particular the state-sponsored murders and other violence directed at Afro-Brazilians, including activists opposing anti-Black racism. These anthropologists underscore that race is a cultural matter and that new forms of racist and anti-racist narratives emerge in relation to a particular interplay of local and global factors.

A deep history of thinking about races as natural human groups has a firm hold on the public imagination. Anthropologists in this issue explain how this misconception produces harmful social inequalities and violence toward subordinate racialized groups. They also point out a dispiriting case of circular “reasoning,” whereby the existence of these inequities inadvertently supports persistent misconceptions that “racial” genetic differences account for unequal health patterns. By amplifying anti-racist narratives, anthropologists challenge racialized thinking and the consequences of anti-Black racism and other harmful social constructs.

### **Language rights matter**

Listening to alternative narratives about climate change, racism, and other critical public issues requires listening to ideas expressed in many languages. Yet, as with other threats to humanity, anthropologists express alarm at the accelerated loss of linguistic diversity and language rights. Linguist diversity constitutes a cherished aspect of human heritage, and advancing language rights nurtures human dignity, autonomy, and wellbeing as well as fosters broader understandings of the challenges and possibilities facing humanity. In fact, people using non-official languages challenge a long-held illusion that national wellbeing requires residents to adopt dominant languages as their primary means of communication. As anthropologists advance understanding of linguistic diversity, they increasingly bring into relief that language rights are human rights.

Surveying disturbing trends of language loss, Gerald Roche ([2020](#)) highlights the political threats to indigenous and minoritized languages. Even with the increasing attention to identifying endangered languages, many communities witness an accelerated loss of their local languages. For Roche, solutions to language loss require recognizing “a widespread sense of something missing from the picture” (p. 166). Instead of framing the problem as the need to conserve endangered languages, Roche uses a social justice approach to emphasize that the patterns of language abandonment result from the political marginalization of the speakers of those languages. This reality requires anthropologists to join with speakers and signers of disappearing languages to counter language oppression. Roche quotes the Māori-language activist Wharehuia Milroy who argues, “Languages are lost through domination, oppression, and subordination—by the denial of social justice” (p. 168). We live in a multilingual world where language use relates to power. Language research and educational actions need to combine with social justice interventions that recognize the rights of speakers of thousands of oppressed languages. Language rights are a matter of human rights and require anthropologists, linguists, and others to “sincerely hear the voices of the linguistically oppressed” (p. 164). Following Roche, we believe that anthropology offers an important means for bringing together research with action that cultivates a more humane multilingual and multicultural world.

Examining a specific social context, Cynthia Groff ([2018](#)) demonstrates how politics and power marginalize Kumauni language use and thus Kumauni speakers in North India. In a country with nearly 780 spoken languages, national policies and institutions facilitate multiculturalism but



only support 22 official languages. Dominant national-level policies have abandoned Kumauni and all other non-official languages. National ideologies characterize non-official linguistic varieties as tribal languages and dialects, inflecting a sense of inferiority for those using Kumauni as a mode of communication in a global economy. Local languages are not forbidden, but political marginalization in education, government, census counts, and business results in non-official linguistic varieties becoming undervalued, invisible, and erased from an imagined future. Groff notes that as official languages enter more areas of life in North India, “Kumauni may be at risk of being forgotten.” (p. 14). Groff also explores how some Kumauni speakers conceive of living with and using a minoritized language, selectively following and ignoring dominant language ideologies. Kumauni realities contrast with nationalist ideologies that require monolingualism or even a narrow recognition of multilingualism. In so doing, they challenge prevalent ideas that attribute lower status and inferior qualities to people associated with a local language. This study demonstrates how anthropologists can advance language rights by bringing attention to local language ideologies and practices that counter language abandonment and political marginalization.

## **Narrating the Past**

In considering accounts of the human past, an effective way to counter misinformation and misrepresentation is to acknowledge multiple perspectives and different ways of interpreting the world and to provide people with ways to think about and evaluate the validity of these differences. “Truth” can be “subjective and fluctuating,” a point archaeologists make when fondly quoting the infamous “archaeologist” Indiana Jones, who quipped “Archaeology is the search for fact, not truth. If it’s truth you’re looking for, Dr. Tyree’s philosophy class is right down the hall” (for example, [Anderson 2015, 119](#)). In the last decade or so, archaeologists have made an effort to recognize the limitations of empirical research and acknowledge the value of the narratives and perspectives of other stakeholders of the past they study. Thus, “truth” and “responsibility” meet in archaeologists’ discussions of collaboration, stakeholders, and multivocality—the idea that a cultural phenomenon can mean different things to different people—as they explore ways to assess conflicting and contested understandings of cultural phenomena.

Chip Colwell explores how Indigenous Archaeology models ways to reframe questions and answers about the past that counter Western biases and honor the values and beliefs of descendant communities (see [Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2010](#)). In his review of Michael Wilcox’s book, *The Pueblo Revolt and the Mythology of Conquest: An Indigenous Archaeology of Contact*, Colwell describes how a pluralistic archaeological practice incorporates non-material evidence such as oral narratives into its interpretations of the past. Further, as Colwell notes, if one begins with different premises and assumptions, one can reach a different interpretation and understanding. In his book, Wilcox challenges scholarly and popular discussions of Puebloan peoples that usually tell a story of cultural discontinuity, demographic collapse, and loss of traditional culture after Europeans arrived in the American Southwest. Instead of reconfirming this standard narrative of Puebloan history, Wilcox inverts the perspective and “explores the

mechanisms of Pueblo cultural continuity, how colonial violence profoundly impacted Pueblo populations, and the ways in which Pueblo peoples actively resisted rather than easily capitulated to European conquest” (p. 689). Most importantly, Puebloan descendant communities view the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 as a war of independence and Spanish colonial policies as inadvertently strengthening, rather than destroying, Pueblo identity. Colwell also cogently demonstrates how word choice can unintentionally undermine one’s argument, noting that Wilcox’s choice of the word “abandonment” to describe ancient Puebloan movement from one set of communities to another implies that they surrendered their claims to particular places, when in fact former inhabitants continued to actively engage with ancestral homelands in rituals and oral traditions. Sarah Surface-Evans and Sarah Jones (2020) demonstrate how empirical researchers can benefit from valuing the alternative narratives of descendant communities. Working collaboratively with descendant communities to “elicit untold and hidden narratives” and “bring marginalized voices to the forefront” (p. 110), they explore diversity of memory, telling three different narratives based on archaeological, archival, and oral data from the Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School in Michigan. They use the concept of “haunting” to frame their understandings of how the traumatic events associated with the school’s past continue to impact the present. “Ghosts,” they note, are often attached to places and things, the sort of material remains that archaeologists study. In their investigations of the Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School, stories of haunting—associated not just with the school buildings but also with pre-contact mounds and cemeteries—revealed new histories of the indigenous communities’ violent displacement and their children’s mistreatment at the hands of federal officials.

Importantly, because haunting is often so closely related to violent events or disasters, Surface-Evans and Jones point out that “recognizing haunting can help to expose past injustices” (p. 113). After the Saginaw Chippewa Tribe of Michigan took possession of a portion of the former boarding school campus, they formed a committee in collaboration with Central Michigan University faculty and students to “to learn more about the past and, more importantly, to teach others about what happened there...[and transform] the school into a place of healing, education, and empowerment” (p. 113). Materials collected and analyzed through standard archaeological procedures were used to elicit stories from community members, creating parallel narratives about what happened at the school, not only of “control and oppression,” but also stories of “subversion, resistance, and rebellion.” For example, a bead recovered near the girls’ work building elicited stories of how maintaining their beadwork tradition was an act of defiance for girls at the school. The recovery of burnt brick, melted glass, and other construction debris fit with contemporaneous news accounts of girls starting fires at the school. However, rather than portraying these objects as evidence of the crime of arson, the descendent community interpreted past objects, along with oral histories and documentary evidence, as signs of rebellion and resilience.

Kathryn Weedman Arthur (2020) demonstrates the power of accepting different ways of knowing and understanding the world as she describes how she learned from Ethiopian mothers and matrons. She decries “intellectual imperialism,” noting, “We lose substantial knowledge when we fail to listen and learn and when we dismiss diverse intellectual contributions and ways



of viewing the world” (p. 42). She critiques colonialist and androcentric views of African cultures and histories, as well as Western feminist views that she says all too often portray African women as victimized and repressed, ignoring their heritage of activism in fights against enslavement and colonial authority. She explores how she gained the respect and trust of a group of elite Boreda women and how they eventually gave her the responsibility to write down and share information about their history, their heritage, and their sacred landscapes. As she states, “In the view of many Boreda, my motherhood, my long-term commitment to the community, and my willingness to shed my academic training and learn through their praxis by listening and experiencing bit by bit were essential to becoming a cultural apprentice (Arthur 2017, 2019). I had transformed and was endowed with the responsibility to preserve and communicate to the next generation and to outsiders a Boreda perception of the inter-relationship between motherhood, leadership, heritage, and their sacred landscapes” (p. 42). Arthur’s choice of the word “endowed” to describe how she obtained “responsibility” clearly signals the collaborative nature of the work in which she engaged. Arthur demonstrated her willingness to embrace alternative perspectives and in the process gained access to a cave where archaeological excavations under her direction revealed the burial of a 4,500-year-old man whose exceptionally well-preserved DNA yielded the “first ancient complete African genetic sequence” (p. 48), which gained international recognition and became a source of great pride for the local community. This case demonstrates how listening and collaborating can lead to a richer understanding of the past that benefits everyone.

In their appeal for multivocality, Chip Colwell and T. J. Ferguson report how they collaborate with Hopi and Zuni advisors to incorporate indigenous and Western/Anglo academic perspectives when interpreting cultural histories and ancestral landscapes (see [Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2006](#)). They point out that archaeological materials have long generated political—and often controversial or contested—interpretations. As they explore how to deal with alternative versions of the past, they argue that we need not accept uncritically all accounts as equally valid, as this would require, for example, that we accept as legitimate Nazi narratives of Aryan preeminence or claims that extraterrestrials aided in the construction of ancient monuments. But, they argue, neither should we dismiss out of hand the accounts of descendant communities if they are not obtained through “scientific” study, as this would uphold empirical academic researchers as the “ultimate arbitrators of truth” and devalue the knowledge and cultural significance of ancient places and things to modern indigenous peoples. Rather, Colwell and Ferguson “argue for a middle path that simultaneously embraces multivocality and seeks an objective understanding of the world” (p. 149).

In exploring a middle path in their collaboration with descendent communities, Colwell and Ferguson demonstrate how traditional narratives and knowledge shared by indigenous advisors can inform “scientific” archaeological studies and, conversely, how their Zuni and Hopi colleagues use archaeological data and the documentary record—usually the purview of empirical researchers—to help them understand the lives of their ancestors. Importantly, the authors also stress that indigenous narratives provide insight into how different cultures view and value the past and how they see themselves today. The study of humans past and present through

empirical research is a core aim of anthropology. Nevertheless, Colwell and Ferguson note: “Our role as anthropologists, after all, is not merely discerning the past through scientific study but also understanding how people use the past to make meaning in their lives today” (p. 150). In this sense, understanding the diversity of perspectives about the past is also at the heart of studying humanity.

Colwell and Ferguson’s call for multivocality and active dialogue among stakeholders demonstrates how such an approach not only benefits our study of the material past, but also contributes to decolonizing anthropology more generally. Some of their findings clearly questioned archaeological discourse. For example, although archaeologists usually interpret middens—accumulations of broken and seemingly discarded materials—as banal trash, their Zuni informants said that such “trash” should not be considered waste, but rather as heirlooms and remains of sacred things. Overall, Colwell and Ferguson demonstrate that there is no one “truth” about the past, but rather that there are different ways of understanding the past, each with its own methods, objectives, and outcomes. Sometimes, they note, our understandings of the past can have “concurrently, and not contradictorily,” both historical and mythological aspects. Thus, they argue, alternative narratives need not be in conflict with one another, nor should we always see alternative explanations proffered by various stakeholders as irreconcilable or the past as irresolutely “contested.”

David Anderson ([2015](#)) takes up a similar theme on conflicting views of the cultural history of Mexico. While editing the volume in which his essay appeared (*Constructing Legacies of Mesoamerica: Archaeological Practice and the Politics of Heritage in and Beyond Mexico*), Anderson reflected on many of his core beliefs, such as the primacy of using objective data to reach supposedly unbiased conclusions, the comparative validity of accounts circulated by anyone who feels they have a stake in a particular past, and the diffuse idea of “archaeological truth” (p. 119). Anderson points to archaeologists’ longstanding recognition that traditional historical accounts and understandings of the past are rarely complete, unvarnished “truths.” As he says, “I have long been drawn to archaeology’s ability to unmask biases in written records” in no small measure because “[h]uman beings are notorious for their ability to present narratives that are to their own benefit” (p. 121). Yet, he notes, he was often quick to dismiss alternative narratives that deviated from those derived from empirical archaeological research.

Anderson identifies many stakeholders in Mexico’s past: agencies of the Mexican government tasked with managing archaeological resources, communities located near archaeological sites, descendent communities (which are not always the same as contemporary local communities), professional archaeologists, tour guides, tourists, and New Age spiritualists, to name many, but not all. He observes that situations involving multiple stakeholders will include individuals and groups with a variety of background and agendas, making conflict “perhaps inevitable.” Anderson’s view is particularly compelling because, like Colwell and Ferguson, he teases out the nuances of evaluating different explanations and narratives. He considers his reaction to stakeholders whose narratives don’t align with his scientific understanding, for example the tour guide who gives “wrong” information about the occupation of the site of Tulum and, the New

Age spiritualists who misrepresent the nature and meaning of the Maya calendrical system as well as ancient Maya belief systems more generally. Like Colwell and Ferguson, he questions how we should draw boundaries for including certain viewpoints as those of “valid” stakeholders. For example, he asks whether we should consider looters as valid stakeholders in the pre-Hispanic past, because they fit a commonly cited definition of stakeholders as “any individual who ‘believes that they have a right to possess, or protect, or purvey (or any combination of these actions) archaeological artefacts’” (citing Kersel (2012, 256) on p. 120). Further, he asks, “does simply being a stakeholder make one’s perspective valid? What then is the appropriate metric for determining valid stakeholders? Whose opinions, whose interest should be prized over ‘less valid’ stakeholders?” (p. 123).

Anderson weighs the relative validity of different stakeholders in the Maya past other than archaeologists and descendant communities. He rejects looters out of hand because of the short-term, destructive nature of their interests. He concludes that the tour guide who gets the chronology and relationships among sites “wrong” is doing little harm, while likely fostering an interest in Maya archaeology that could benefit descendant communities. And he criticizes the New Age spiritualists, arguing that their appropriation and distortion of Maya beliefs “crossed too far across the line of truth for me to not object” (p. 123) in large measure because they used Maya beliefs to further their own “Western” agendas with no regard for the indigenous population. Thus, he implies, the possibility of exclusion of some people who purport to have a stake in a cultural history is not simply a matter of scientific or empirical validity but may involve ethical and social responsibilities to other stakeholders, especially descendent communities.

### **Closing: Listening to Humanity**

In *A Possible Anthropology: Methods for Uneasy Times*, Anand Pandian (2019) explores how anthropologists cultivate a sense of curiosity and care for humanity. Concerned for the past, present, and future of humanity, anthropologists listen more carefully to diverse insights and new possibilities for addressing weighty human concerns, including climate change and social inequality. In this issue of *Open Anthropology*, we feature curious and caring anthropologists and their collaborators who have listened to many concerns and amplified consequential knowledge about pandemics, climate change, racism, language justice, and concurrent narratives of the past.

Moreover, using anthropology’s holistic approach, we recognize that alternative perspectives about human circumstances interconnect with one another. We know, for example, that some racialized people living in vulnerable environments use marginalized languages to voice concerns about social justice, local history, and human rights. Such cases demonstrate that people directly experiencing a range of critical social issues have valuable insights and creative solutions to share with anthropologists and others. As a powerful example, instituting Talanoa Dialogues to address climate change policy can enhance sustainability for all of Earth’s inhabitants. Some anthropological accounts of alternative insights will remain ambiguous and in flux, especially as new research inevitably complicates conventional knowledge. Nevertheless,

like Pandian, we believe that great promise comes from identifying consequential truths that open up meaningful possibilities for humanity. We also believe that establishing trustworthy anthropological accounts to address humanity's pressing issues carries the responsibility of sharing diverse views, voices, and interventions with broader publics.

The anthropologists in this issue demonstrate the importance of increasing public awareness of diverse cultural perspectives. The comparison across social contexts reveals patterns that otherwise might have remained invisible and left to the margins of global discussions about resolving current and future threats to humanity. Likewise, anthropologists bring greater public attention to a wider range of creative actions, such as the Potato Park that integrates indigenous and scientific methods for understanding and responding to climate change threats to food security. We believe increasing awareness of responses to many problems—health inequalities, loss of biodiversity, racialized violence, language injustice, and marginalized histories—offer ways to eliminate threats to security and peace, dignity and freedom.

The selected authors show how local views bring clarity to debates about consequential patterns of socially produced disparities. Many communities have moved past debating whether broader harmful patterns are true or not. They witness sea levels rising, languages being abandoned, racialized violence persisting, and local histories remaining ignored. At the same time, many communities defy narratives of inevitable outside domination, apocalypse, and endangerment, and instead mobilize narratives of hope, adaptation, and possibility to make a global difference. Anthropologists help amplify voices of many groups, including those from out-of-the-way places who regularly suffer most directly from harmful policies and practices that benefit dominant groups. By weaving together narratives across different cultural contexts, anthropologists connect people with common issues who otherwise might remain separated by division and difference. Moreover, anthropologists create meaningful understandings and advocacy by collaborating with local communities as well as other scientists, political leaders, and activists. Such collaborations enhance research-based knowledge and lead to sound public policy and social change. In short, cross-cultural comparison with collaboration provides a powerful method for generating understanding, compassion, and effective action.

As we organized this issue, we sought to feature anthropologists committed to listening to and sharing narratives voiced by diverse groups grappling with critical social issues. At the upcoming annual conference, anthropologists will discuss many forms of knowledge and practices to address problems vexing humans. For anthropologists, establishing trustworthy perspectives about what it means to be human requires taking seriously our scientific and ethical responsibilities to listen to the stories of all humans. Listening with curiosity and compassion allow for greater possibilities of advancing wisdom, freedom, and justice for humanity.

### **Additional References Cited**

Antrosio, Jason and Sallie Han. 2015. "The Editors' Note: Race, Racism, and Protesting Anthropology." *Open Anthropology* 3(3).

Arthur, Kathryn Weedman. 2017. "An Ethnoarchaeology of Deep Listening." *SAA Record Special Section, Listening to our Peers*, edited by Alice B. Kehoe and Peter R. Schmidt, 17(4):20-21.

Arthur, Kathryn Weedman. 2019. "Ethnoarchaeologies of Listening: Learning Technological Ontologies Bit by Bit." *Archaeologies of Listening*, edited by Peter Schmidt and Alice B. Kehoe, 25–46. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press.

Ennis-McMillan, Michael C. and Kristin Hedges. 2020. "Pandemic Perspectives." *Open Anthropology* 8(1).

Kersel, Morag M. 2012 The Value of a Looted Object: Stakeholders Perceptions in the Antiquities Trade. In *The Oxford Handbook of Public Archaeology*, edited by Robin Skeates, Carol McDavid, and John Carman, pp. 253–272. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mullings, Leith. 2013. "Preface: Introducing *Open Anthropology*." *Open Anthropology* 1(1).

Pandian, Anand. 2019. *A Possible Anthropology: Methods for Uneasy Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

**Volume 9, Number 3**  
**November 2021**

Archaeological Positivism and Cultural Plurality: Working with Conflicting Views of Mesoamerican Legacies

David S. Anderson – *Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association*. 25(1):119–27 (2015)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Wombs of the Earth: Preserving and Reconstituting Feminine Prestige and Dignity through Heritage

Kathryn Weedman Arthur – *Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association*. 31(1):41–53 (2020)

[Read more about this article >](#)

The Bolsonaro Election, Antiblackness, and Changing Race Relations in Brazil

Antonio José Bacelar da Silva and Erika Robb Larkins – *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*. 24(4):893–913 (2019)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Book Review The Pueblo Revolt and the Mythology of Conquest: An Indigenous Archaeology of Contact: An Indigenous Archaeology of Contact, Michael V. Wilcox

Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh – *American Anthropologist*. 112(4):689–690 (2010)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Memory Pieces and Footprints: Multivocality and the Meanings of Ancient Times and Ancestral Places Among the Zuni and Hopi

Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh and T. J. Ferguson – *American Anthropologist*. 108(1):148–162 (2006)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Sakha and Alaas: Place Attachment and Cultural Identity in a Time of Climate Change

Susan Alexandra Crate – *Anthropology and Humanism*. (2021)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Language Policy and Language Ideology: Ecological Perspectives on Language and Education in the Himalayan Foothills

Cynthia Groff – *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*. 49(1):3–20 (2018)

[Read more about this article >](#)

A Qualitative Analysis of How Anthropologists Interpret the Race Construct



Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, Jennifer K. Wagner, Joon-Ho Yu, Tanya M. Harrell, Michael J. Bamshad, and Charmaine D. Royal – *American Anthropologist*. 119(3):422-434 (2017)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Why Pacific Islanders Stopped Worrying about the Apocalypse and Started Fighting Climate Change

Stuart Kirsch – *American Anthropologist*. 122(4):827-839 (2020)

[Read more about this article >](#)

The Biology of Racism

Leith Mullings, Jada Benn Torres, Agustín Fuentes, Clarence C. Gravlee, Dorothy Roberts, and Zaneta Thayer – *American Anthropologist*. 123(3):671-680 (2021)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Plantation Politics, Paranoia, and Public Health on the Frontlines of America's COVID-19 Response

Yesmar Oyarzun – *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. 34(4):578-590 (2020)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Abandoning Endangered Languages: Ethical Loneliness, Language Oppression, and Social Justice

Gerald Roche – *American Anthropologist*. 122(1):164-169 (2020)

[Read more about this article >](#)

You Can't Grow Potatoes in the Sky: Building Resilience in the Face of Climate Change in the Potato Park of Cuzco, Peru

Matthew Sayre, Tammy Stenner, and Alejandro Argumedo – *Culture, Agriculture, Food and Environment*. 39(2):100-108 (2017)

[Read more about this article >](#)

Discourses of the Haunted: An Intersubjective Approach to Archaeology at the Mount Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School

Sarah L. Surface-Evans and Sarah J. Jones – *Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association*. 31(1):110-21 (2020)

[Read more about this article >](#)