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FORUM

What Good Is Anthropology? Celebrating 50 Years of *American Ethnologist*

The maturing of anthropology

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Abstract
As anthropology reaches maturity, its contributions are likely to grow. This is because the discipline's practitioners, in writing parochial ethnography, can link a respect for individual difference to our understanding of global humanity. Such a practice aligns with the growing political struggle to retain meaning in an expanding world. Moreover, anthropology's commitment to life as lived research, including private domains and engagement with digital worlds, will also become more significant, while anthropology's ethos of empathy will expand beyond the human. Reaching maturity will require a further repudiation of inequality and colonialism, developing a different relationship to theory, philosophy, and engaged anthropology, as well as fostering a much wider commitment to global education.

KEYWORDS
digital anthropology, empathy, engagement, ethnography, future, privacy, theory

THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

The story of anthropology has hardly begun, and the discipline's necessity and value will grow well beyond their present state, becoming more vital to social science, the humanities, and philosophy. Anthropology can gain greater respect for its contribution to our empathetic understanding of each other, and our ability to obtain knowledge about the contemporary world unavailable by any other means. It can also make an enhanced contribution to welfare. These outcomes are by no means guaranteed. They have to be earned and achieved through exemplary research and sustained commitment. Such claims may sound surprisingly upbeat, given our current concern with internal self-criticism and our external struggle for funding and support within academia. But there is evidence from the past 50 years to suggest these possibilities within the next 50 years.

When *American Ethnologist* was founded, a student of anthropology in the UK could still have as their first textbook *Economy, Habitat and Society* (Forde, 1934), which describes how populations obtained subsistence through technological affordances. The focus was on peoples then regarded by the general public as "primitive." As Fabian (1983) argued, anthropology was expected to imply a correspondence between contemporary tribal societies and stages of social evolution.

The legacy of colonialism was everywhere. Much of the subsequent 50 years has consisted of trying to repudiate many of the problematic aspects of anthropology's origins. On the one hand, Boas, Malinowski, and Mead had laid the foundations of something really special: an ethnographic method that depends on one of humanity's most laudable qualities, empathy. Understanding why other societies and their practices appear as moral and normal to those populations. But there remained the legacy of a colonial heritage, which journals such as *American Ethnologist* have endeavored to subject to continual critique. There is no intrinsic link between ethnography as method and any particular society or category. We could all gain equally from such investigations, the countries of the colonizer as much as the colonized, and researchers could and should come from either. By the 1980s the curriculum in the UK expected anthropology about India to include Indian anthropologists such as Srinivas (1978) and Das (1977).

It may yet take another 50 years to reach maturity. We are developing our consciousness of why we must rage against the inequalities, discriminations, and sufferings of our contemporary world. We grow through our own self-critiques, such as that of Clifford and Marcus (1986), as well as incorporated critiques, such as the one Godelier (1972) derived from structural Marxism. Asad (1973) reminded us of our colonial

origins, Weiner ([1976]) demonstrated the implications of feminism, and Anderson ([2019]) documented the contradictions in anthropological approaches to racism. Now we have fine textbooks (Eriksen, [2023]), and we readily engage with contemporary issues such as the consequence of digital technologies (Miller et al., [2021]). There remains, however, plenty to repudiate and oppose. Maturity should not imply growing out of this critical stance on our often-tragic world.

THE FUTURE—WHAT NEEDS TO BE RETAINED

Where is the evidence for forecasting a bright future for anthropology? Such a future could include not only further developments within the discipline but also changes in the world around us. The first grounds for claiming anthropology may grow in significance comes from our condition as the most extreme of social sciences. Extremism is an intrinsic quality of an anthropology defined by its relationship with ethnography. At one extreme, ethnography requires commitment to the most particularistic version of social research. This can mean spending 16 months living in a village or working as an intern in an IT corporation. While becoming more varied in time and form (Wilk, [2011]), ethnography mostly remains a practice of living and working with people, developing a close personal engagement with those whom one can come to know well.

Yet anthropology, with its intellectual predecessors and new commitments to decolonialism (Mignolo, [2009]), also strives toward profound and original insights about humanity as a whole. Through comparative studies, it has become far easier to transform parochial ethnography into anthropology. For example, the projects I have been involved in recently used digital technologies for constant comparison during fieldwork, not just comparing results on return.[1] Anthropological extremism lies in this simultaneous commitment to the most parochial and the most encompassing—a contrast with the style of social research that aims to test limited hypotheses through selected variables.

But why should this make us the discipline of the future? At least since Hegel we have understood the world as simultaneously growing in both the universal and the particular. Increasingly, we avow universal human rights and expectations for a world that we see ever more of, thanks to travel and the media. The larger the world, the smaller we may feel within it. The digital universe is an actual expansion, thousands more places we can visit and know. For many, this grows their connections with the wider world. But for others this creates a feeling of still less significance or influence. One result has been a profound shift in politics, which was once mostly characterized as right versus left, but is now increasingly divided between those who feel comfortable within an enhanced cosmopolitanism and those who feel threatened, demeaned, and diminished by a more cosmopolitan and often dominant class. The political backlash was evident in the anti-modernism of 1930s fascism, but equally in the many populist regimes of today that promise to protect the local and traditional from the foreign and the new.

How can we prevent the macrocosm and the microcosm from flying apart? How can we be enhanced by the capacities vouchsafed by an expanded world without feeling diminished? These questions explain the increasing significance of a discipline defined by an extremist commitment to keeping the parochial and the universal in conversation. The best anthropological writing includes empathetic accounts of individuals while simultaneously providing insights into both typicality and diversity within a given population. Its wider implications pertain to our sustained anthropological ambitions to understand contemporary humanity as a whole and, increasingly, that which lies beyond humanity.

How can this potential be realized? Fortunately, anthropologists retain a second unique quality—the commitment to research life as lived through participant observation. Ethnography opposes the overreliance on research techniques such as interviews and surveys. In contrast, I describe ethnography as holistic contextualization. No one lives inside a research topic. We all live all our topics simultaneously. The same person may work, have kin, have health concerns, use social media, struggle, practice religion and humor. As Gupta and Ferguson ([1977]) note, the ethnographic positivism of the field site is now necessarily expanded to include history, political economy, and whatever else may have consequences for our research participants that cannot be directly observed. Cotemporary ambitions go beyond the specifics of place and of people (Tsing et al., [2019]). This commitment to life as lived gifts anthropology its fundamental humanism as a grounded polarity within its extremism. While other disciplines flood into the study of algorithms, big data, and AI, we incorporate such developments by continually insisting that what matters most is how these technologies will affect the people we will continue to live among, and the planet. The more that big data and similar processes decontextualize people, the more a digital anthropology insists on a return to context.

In short, we create academic work that speaks directly to the problems of our dialectical world, including how to value the human within an expanding universe. The task of revealing people's creativity and struggles should not be ceded to fiction. We try to reveal the stories of particular people and with them make a contribution to analysis and theory that sustains the opposite polarity of anthropology. We debate how to speak of the typical and the normative without the essentialism that leads to stereotyping. As the last life-as-lived researchers standing, we can make an ever more valuable contribution to politics, policy, and the more general existential problems of meaning and mattering within this ever-expanding universe, with its Douyin/TikTok algorithms and ChatGPT. We thereby become one of the most contemporary of disciplines precisely because of our relevance to these problematic directions of travel in the world around us.

Ethnographic life-as-lived research also aligns with a bottom-up rather than a top-down perspective. Here too the world is becoming more aligned with our discipline. Even a single device such as the smartphone gives our interlocutors extraordinary capacities. Although major corporations have spent huge sums on creating bespoke phone apps for health, my colleagues and I found that there were far more significant impacts on health from the way people appropriated their own

preferred smartphone apps and deployed these for health purposes (Miller et al., 2021). These adaptations to smartphones were not performed by special people. Anthropology is unusual in that sometimes we choose a population to study because we have no particular reason to study them. Everyone is equally significant in this *smart-from-below* perspective.

A commitment to life-as-lived research requires us to follow other changes in the world, such as that from the public domains traditionally studied by ethnographers to the private home. Our world is increasingly dominated by nuclear families in apartment blocks. It is essential that we remain present in those same spaces. This connects with the original feminist insistence on acknowledging domestic labor and not just salaried employment as central to our lives. We may recognize that COVID-19 has led to an increase in hybrid working for more affluent populations, but we have conspicuously failed to engage with the rise of retirement and growing life expectancy in these populations, such that in some regions people may spend more years as retirees than as workers. Most disciplines give up on research that involves going beyond the front room. This can also represent a social problem. I undertook research near London on the problems of loneliness and isolation for people diagnosed with a terminal illness. Much of this stemmed from others' reluctance to step inside the private home, even when its residents had become immobile (Miller, 2017). Anthropologists have to be where people are. Over a 16-month ethnography, it is possible to build trust and strong relationships that allow for such copresence in homes and on WhatsApp messages. It is also possible to do so with deference, consent, and respect that contrasts with the presumptive intrusions of colonial-era ethnography.

This commitment abuts a current ethical dilemma. We read about surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), and the Chinese state's relentless incursion into privacy (Strittmatter, 2019), and feel we are becoming mere data extracted for power and profit. Privacy is in dire need of protection. Yet there is a danger that in responding, we will only strengthen the neoliberal cult of privacy (De Bruin, 2010; Rossler, 2005), in which all knowledge of a person is individualized private property, so that even a census becomes suspect. We are losing the social-democratic ideal of knowledge as a public good, foundational to education. The solution is to remind ourselves that the paramount principle of ethics should be to avoid harm. We can both oppose all uses of personal information that could cause harm and recognize our responsibility to research people's domestic worlds as essential, if we are to document the human consequences of political economy and states. Our teaching should be based on knowledge and scholarship, rather than ignorance of the heart of people's lives. It is ethical to research the private domain.

A broader problem is that it has become much harder to discuss with students the need to engage with their research participants to understand and be sensitive to local concepts of harm and ethics. This has been displaced by the labor of compliance with ethics committees that avow universal protocols rather than local ethics (Fassin, 2006). It has also become harder to justify research on people who exploit, abuse, and oppress, when compliance regulations focus on whether we have their consent or should be showing them what we are writing. Both

ethics committees and the neoliberal cult of privacy may have more to do with universities protecting themselves from litigation than ensuring welfare. Once again, it is long-term fieldwork that can best achieve a sensitivity to local concepts of harm and obtain sufficient material to write generalities compatible with the degree of anonymity required to research private worlds without causing subsequent harm. My request to students is that we should remain responsible for ethics and not cede this responsibility to ethics committees.

Another unusual facet of anthropology is that our commitment to life as lived is based more on participant observation than just on what people say. We recognize that language may often be more a form of legitimation than self-description. The older people I work with tell me they use merely two or three functions of their smartphones, but later observation reveals that they are using 30. But then they had no reason for such self-monitoring. Almost every other social science emphasizes interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups, which conflate language with practice. Anthropology therefore needs to contribute an education based on researching what people do alongside what they say they do.

Fortunately, all these exhortations are linked by our commitment to empathy, one of humanity's core virtues. They are all a means for achieving a better understanding of other people. Training in anthropology should ideally include research with people who have an entirely opposite political view or very different experiences, and to try to understand why that is the case and why those who detest our politics and ethics believe that it is they, not us, who occupy the moral high ground. This goes well beyond acknowledging the position from which we undertake our research. Empathy remains our most potent weapon against xenophobia and the demonization of the Other (but cf. Fassin, 2012). No other discipline has empathy so close to its heart. This too is likely to be more important in the future, not less, because with no letup in militarization and fragmentation, the dangers of demonizing the Other is a growing threat. According to the humanist (but not necessarily the posthumanist), empathy for other people can be extended to the nonhuman world such as animals and the planet.

Empathy and extremism were at the heart of my team's recent studies of older people and smartphones. Several of our researchers taught courses on smartphone use to appreciate the struggles that older people have in trying to deal with a device that has no manual. We needed to experience the way they felt denigrated and excluded, when the interface with governments goes online and creates this new digital divide (Miller et al., 2021). Empathy also included an insistence that our monographs provide detailed stories that express the unique quality of each individual and relationship, now also transmitted through the way they uniquely reconfigure their smartphones (e.g., Haapio-Kirk, forthcoming; Wang, 2023). Yet this same evidence about specific individuals and relationships was employed first comparatively and then as the source of global generalizations about a digital world far less beholden to geography. We argued that the smartphone is a *transportal home*, that is, a place within which we live, rather than just a communication device. We examined how it changes our outlook on the world through *perpetual opportunism* and how it

creates intimacy through developing *beyond anthropomorphism* (for an explanation of these terms, see Miller et al., 2021).

The smartphone aligns with the extremism of anthropology in being more intimate than any previous device, but it simultaneously allows us to become more comfortable with the global: for example, in the way migrant communities can combine the families of their natal and their residential homes within their smartphones, or the way global phenomena such as social media are made heterogeneous by regional differences in their deployment. Douyin may be identical as technology to TikTok, but not in its usage or consequence, which was why our previous volume was called *How the World Changed Social Media* (Miller et al., 2016), not *How Social Media Changed the World*.

To conclude, empathy and extremism go together. At the heart of anthropology is the desire to increase people's capacity to empathize with those who are most different from themselves and thereby feel a common humanity rather than an invasive threat when we come to acknowledge our global world. For our method, we try to appreciate people, rather than abstracted data, focus groups, experimental research, or other artifices. Anthropologists have also been in the forefront of decentering what we mean by knowledge, through earlier discussions of epistemology and more recent discussions of ontology (Bessire & Bond, 2014; Holbraad, 2012) and decolonial education (Morreira, 2017; Nyamnjoh, 2012). This is an examination that should always remain integral to the pursuit of knowledge.

THE FUTURE—THINGS THAT NEED TO CHANGE

The work of repudiation is far from over. Paramount is the drive to greater equality given continued discrepancies in who gets to do research and who gets to be researched (Besnier, 2016). There is progress. The teams I have worked within over the last 10 years included ethnographers from Argentina, Brazil, Cameroon, China, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Palestine, Romania, Trinidad, UK, and the US. One of my colleagues is a Brazilian who has carried out fieldwork among the English. Exemplifying the previous point about empathy, her work on the English concept of character undoubtedly benefited from the degree to which she found the English strange (Balthazar, 2017). We can now be guided by Francis Nyamnjoh's (2017) discussions of conviviality, while the Wenner-Gren Foundation consistently supports anthropologists from less affluent countries. But there is still much to do before we can claim maturity defined by demonstrable equality.

Our history gives us a specific responsibility in relation to indigeneity (Kenrick & Lewis, 2014; Simpson, 2007), a responsibility to recognize historical and present oppression, to support redress for rights over land and identity, and to protect inherited cultural diversity. We also want to support the authenticity of new worlds, including the digital. For example, we need empathetic engagement with young people's experiences on social media, because this is rarely present in contemporary journalism. Similarly, my recent ethnography in Ireland (Miller, 2023) documents the creation of community by those the Irish call "blow-ins," meaning migrants to the town. I remain influenced by Paul Gilroy's (1993) *The Black Atlantic* and the proposition that all culture is hybrid. If, in a national census, people want to identify themselves as Jedi (as from *Star Wars*),[2] we should respect their cultural ingenuity and rights (Bender, 1999; Jeevendrampillai, 2021).

A previous section of this essay praised the work of critique in countering complacency, and *American Ethnologist* has published many fine examples (Chatterjee, 1989; Gupta, 1995). Perhaps maturity comes with an appreciation that critique should be a means rather than an end. A better way of measuring our concern for welfare is how far we as anthropologists demonstrably improve welfare. I cannot present evidence, but I still sense an immature internal status hierarchy that views what used to be called applied anthropology as of lower status than pure critique, because it is inevitably more compromised. Improving welfare often involves working directly with governments and corporations. So *engaged* can mean directed at current political events (e.g., Besnier, 2019; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Eriksen, 2020; Gusterson, 2017; Holmes & Castañeda, 2016), but it should also mean collaboration with nonanthropologists in welfare projects. Fortunately, medical anthropology, led by figures such as Kleinman (1985), and evident in, for example, the Ebola Response Anthropology Forum (https://www.heart-resources.org/ebola-response-anthropology-platform/), has made considerable strides in growing our respect for such practical engagement.

There is a second similar sign of immaturity in our current stance to theory. Theory has become a fetish: "Your essay is fine, but it needs more theory." It is sometimes necessary to work in highly esoteric domains that are hard to convey without specialist language. But this can segue into obfuscation, which is more about reproducing elite status within academia, allowing scholars to become what Bourdieu (1984a) called aristocrats of culture. Theory is an essential goal that commonly requires abstraction, decontextualization, and generalization. But in mature anthropological theory, all three of these properties should be negated in situ by including clear, comprehensible illustration from ethnography that returns it to the true task of theory: bringing clarity to explanation (McGranahan, 2022; Miller, 2021).

A third sign of immaturity lies in the way anthropology has traditionally looked up to philosophy. My current volume attempts to reset the relationship between anthropology and philosophy (Miller, 2023), showing why philosophy needs anthropology. To assess the argument of Rawls (1971) about justice, MacIntyre (1981) about virtue, Sartre (2020) about freedom, or the Stoics about life purpose (Seneca, 2007), we need to complement the speculative and often-individualistic arguments of philosophy and learn from the ways actual populations confront these issues in their everyday and social lives. We require a more complementary and mutual exchange, rather than deference to the more abstract discipline. A mature anthropology might grow in influence by contributing to philosophy both insights and evidence that philosophy alone cannot obtain.

Finally, we need to remember that anthropology is mainly situated as an academic discipline within the university system,

which is a significant factor in reproducing structural inequality, being geared to the interests of the elite and wealthy (Bourdieu, 1984b). There are good reasons for universities to be centers for research. But perhaps unnecessarily for education, or at least not as currently practiced. As Gordon Brown (2021, pp. 172–201) has argued, education should be everyone's birthright. A mature anthropology will focus on who should benefit from its findings: its contribution to empathy, its insistence on humanistic representations of people, its understanding of cultural differences, as well as its unique insights into how to explain what people do and are. Just 30 students in a classroom or the world at large?

For the latter we need to expand beyond traditional genres for presenting our findings: developing popular dissemination through ethnographic films, cartoons (https://illustratinganthropology.com/), short videos, graphics, and multimodal forms (Pieta & Sokolovsky, 2023). These can also inspire imaginative collaborations with research participants such as Miyarrka Media's (2019) *Phone and Spear*. As well as breadth, the ethnographic monograph can gain depth through by including visual and aural elements. My projects have fostered translation beyond English, used open access wherever possible, and created short videos and cartoons. Ethnography can also produce fascinating accounts published through the trade press (e.g., Tarlo, 2016). At the level of secondary school education, we might emulate ventures such as the Khan Academy (https://www.khanacademy.org/), which I have observed being used in impoverished regions where there was precious little else available by way of educational resources. Our relationship to research participants matters, but so does our relationship to a million people who might benefit by learning from our ethnographic research. This is not fanciful. The ethnographic monographs and summary volume from our Why We Post series have exceeded 1 million downloads (https://www.uclpress.co.uk/collections/series-why-we-post).

THE VISION

We have a long way to go, and many things still need to change. No doubt some view anthropology as irredeemably tainted by its past, and others would see my socialist humanism as nothing more than confirmation of my structural privilege. I do not regard either myself or the discipline as mature. Both have unacknowledged assumptions that need to be challenged, and I expect to listen and learn from the plurality of perspectives as they emerge. The point of this essay is to strive for maturity rather than to claim it. Current self-reflection is appropriate to the continued task of draining away much that remains from our origins and giving increased attention to crucial problems of the present such as climate change. We need not relinquish that questioning stance as we mature.

This can still be an optimistic ambition. Developments in the world and trajectories within the discipline give hope that a future anthropology might make an increasingly significant contribution to popular education and welfare while retaining its exemplary intellectual heft, for example, in relation to philosophy. There are grounds to claim that our empathetic and ethnographic engagement with people's experience of the digital world has allowed digital anthropology to become the vanguard of contemporary studies of the digital. We also need to remind ourselves of the values to which we aspire and which we offer: of empathy over xenophobia, engagement over speculative projection, genuinely original insights into the nature of humanity and beyond humanity, and a direct contribution to expanding knowledge and improving welfare.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Why We Post, 2012–17; the Anthropology of Smart Phones and Smart Ageing (ASSA) project, 2017–22, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/assa/.

[2] Wikipedia, s.v. "Jedi Census Phenomenon," last modified November 4, 2023, 20:57 (UTC), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jedi_census_phenomenon.

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