

On publishing good work

Recently, during an invited talk about editing this journal, I was asked, “Do you have an agenda?” I allowed the question to hang in silence for a good long while as I considered my answer, which was something like this: “My agenda, such as it is, is to publish good work.”

What, then, constitutes good work? The honest answer is that this is very difficult to define, once the editorial guidelines have been met. Please take careful note of caveat number one, because in my experience so far, the most common reason for a decision of “reject” at this journal is because the submission has not sufficiently articulated a contribution to anthropology. You might be surprised at how many submissions miss this crucial requirement altogether. (If you have not seen the journal’s updated guidelines, I encourage you to take some time to go over them on our website, particularly if you are planning to submit something.)

Do I have to “like” everything I publish? No, I do not. It’s not about what I like or what I don’t. That’s what reviewers are for. It’s not about “liking” for them either. Rather, their task is to assess questions like these: Is the argument sound? Do the claims and the data have a relationship that makes sense? Are the citations appropriate? Is the writing clear? (Once again, I refer you to the submission guidelines.)

One of the great privileges of being an editor-in-chief is having the opportunity to bring new things to the table. Hewing narrowly to what is essentially a four-hundred-year-old writing format—the journal article—seems unnecessarily limiting, particularly now, when publishing is prioritized for digital platforms. I am very interested in exploring how publications might take advantage of the flexibility and creativity that can be exercised in digital spaces. Even with work that is solely based in the written word, playing with modes of writing and venturing into topics that are not strictly field-research-based or high-theory-making can be important contributions to the discipline. Does *American Anthropologist* publish ethnographic poetry or fiction? It might—and that would depend on the individual submission rather than an existing limit on what kinds of writing are acceptable to the journal.

What I do know is that writing, and good writing, is something that the editorial team and I value greatly. Going further, writing that purposefully moves out of certain scholarly conventions definitely can and should be the kind of thing this journal publishes. Orin Starn’s article in this issue is a case in point. “Anthropology and the Misery of Writing”

is a searingly honest account of how hard writing can be. From the outside, Starn might well appear to be someone who has it easy: a cis white man who has a PhD from Stanford, tenure at Duke University, several books, an agent, and a father who was a professor at UC Berkeley. But it turns out that writing has sometimes left him suicidally depressed. One thing I appreciate about this piece is Starn’s willingness to expose his own insecurities and pain. I also appreciate that Starn is very much aware of his privileges and powers, and he does not whine. One of my hopes in publishing “Anthropology and the Misery of Writing” is that others who are experiencing terrible writing times will realize they are not the first to feel hopeless, to struggle, to be stuck. It’s an important piece, as well, because it seems to me that a discipline that’s all about people should probably be willing to address the fact that we ourselves are people. The personal, perhaps even confessional, mode is certainly not the only mode, but it can and should be one of them. If that mode is not for you—no problem. There’s plenty of other content for you to read, enjoy, learn from, emulate, add to your bibliography.

When I first took over at the journal, I had a lot of questions. I would ask, “Does the journal do X, Y, or Z?” And then I would look around for an answer and would realize with horror that I was the one who needed to come up with the answer. But more and more, coming up with an answer feels like an opportunity. In this moment, asking ourselves what journals like *American Anthropologist* do is important and necessary. What is the journal’s responsibility to “the discipline”? How is that responsibility like or unlike a responsibility to people who submit their work for publication? Even more fraught: What does it even mean to be publishing now when nearly everything about publishing is in flux? (That’s a question I’d like to discuss in more detail at a later date.)

I’ve singled out Starn’s article because it’s an experiment that I hope encourages others to consider experiments of their own. There is room in this journal for these kinds of experiments, just as there continues to be room for the more traditional research articles, commentaries, book reviews, and obituaries. One added special feature about the March issue: everything in it is paywall-free for twelve months.

And there you have it. That’s my agenda.

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