



# An Anthropology of North America for the World

*Society for the Anthropology of North America*

David Flood and Megan Raschig

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As two junior faculty members with precarious positions as visiting associate professor (David) and postdoc (Megan), and respective research among white and Latinx working-class populations on the East and West coasts, we have been asking ourselves what particular interventions an anthropology of North America can and should make in the discipline and beyond. Why might this particular regional grouping be good to think with at this point in history?

An obvious but partial answer to the question points to the contributions that in-depth ethnography can make to broader public knowledge by challenging the hegemony of big data, surveys, and interviews. The disciplinary answer is less easy because it requires our ongoing reckoning with the uncertain position of domestic ethnography within anthropology writ large—and the commonality of fieldwork in “our own backyards” as a convenient post-tenure project rather than a first foray. Indeed, the *disciplinary* contribution of North Americanists is often caught between two poles: First, its unique ability to contextualize the cultural and political home terrain of American anthropology per se (and thus of the inevitably cultural lenses we often import invisibly into our work elsewhere). Second, the historically vexed status of domestic anthropology. A future for an anthropology of North America involves staking a central place in the discipline for these inquiries as full-bodied, wide-ranging endeavors supported by long-term immersive fieldwork (and by institutional hiring).

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This is, of course, an argument made possible by the contemporary political moment, which has clarified how little North Americans (anthropologists included) seem to understand their own backyards and neighbors, and how dire the global consequences of this fact. Collectively as North Americanists, we share the imperative and capacity to give sense and depth to today's epistemological and empathic divides, to

connect disparate sites of struggle to overarching structural inequalities, and to glimpse how it could be otherwise. In-depth and situated ethnographic accounts can give coordinates to the broader cultural and economic contexts of the populist moment in which we find ourselves. This urgent work is both reflexive and reparative. Reflexive, because for many North Americanists, our work is done “at home” and as such can help to shed light on the cultural terrain through which American anthropology and American anthropologists are dialectically constituted, blind spots and all. Reparative, in the sense that we seek to understand, imagine, and bring about just futures.

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Our disciplinary politics prioritizes a needed focus on the dispossessed, the marginalized, the forgotten—those who have not, perhaps, been surprised by the persistent default to white nationalism these recent years. To respect these political commitments, we must also insist on carving out space to study laterally, study up, and to connect these analyses beyond the silos of identity politics. Domestic anthropologists are doing important work beyond the boundaries of our traditional political sympathies. Long-term ethnographic research on internal others to middle-class liberalism—rural white working-class communities, middle-class Trump supporters, Tea Party activists, and others outside the bounds of a normative disciplinary focus—is vital to several aspects of the North American anthropological project. This work challenges us to question our own ethical certainties. Through a better understanding of groups or identity categories that most anthropologists might be politically opposed to or uninterested in, we enhance the possibilities of building what appear from the outside to be unlikely alliances or coalitions across lines of racial, class, and cultural division, and we also stand to gain reflexivity towards our own culturally obscured biases and towards some of the internal contradictions of contemporary liberal politics.

We hope to address in this ongoing column the (re)emergent imperative to have a voice as public intellectuals. Even as we desire greater public influence, we continue to wrestle with the politics of representation and collaboration inherent to a discipline in which educational and cultural elites are so persistently focused on marginalized peoples. These two stances, while perhaps emerging from similar political impulses, are in tension. Public engagement is often necessarily reductive and we struggle with a concern for the broad circulation and potential misunderstanding and misapplication of decontextualized snippets of our work—as well as the fraught nature of “speaking for” our interlocutors. We therefore need to develop ways of talking and writing to epistemologically divided audiences across our ethnographic, pedagogical, and public engagements that make our ideas as accessible as possible without diminishing their substance.

However, we are wary of making this column's (or SANA's) project a narrow anthropology of Trumpism or resistance to Trumpism, recognizing the value of different foci and modes of engagement. When we do theorize the Trump era, we must be cautious to avoid overemphasizing Trump's agentive role in our political moment. Rather, we need to situate our analyses in the broader political, economic, and cultural antecedents to today's political arrangements. This will help us mitigate the risk of isolating North American contexts from broader global trends. At the same time, the fallout of Trump's win continues to drift across borders and to disproportionately affect vulnerable populations worldwide. As such, anthropologies of the United States in particular must contend with the disproportionate global reach of the phenomena that we study intimately.

As we engage intensified struggles from almost all angles, our theme for SANA's contributions to *Anthropology News* this year will be the unique role that ethnographers of this continent can play in applying our disciplinary strengths to correcting the weaknesses of contemporary academic and political accounts of our moment, while also showing the central place an anthropology of North America should play within the AAA. This is a vision of an outwardly-focused SANA—an anthropology *of* North America but *for* the world.

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SANA members interested in submitting short texts to our *Anthropology News* column should contact us at [dnf6xb@virginia.edu](mailto:dnf6xb@virginia.edu) and/or [msr2t@virginia.edu](mailto:msr2t@virginia.edu).

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**Richard Handler** says:  
March 29, 2018 at 7:34 pm

Flood and Raschig's excellent opening column implies but never quite states one of the key difficulties that will face colleagues who take up their call. It's one thing to understand others, in this case, the internal others of our own country with whom we may be politically at odds. It's another to build alliances with them. What does that mean? Does it mean converting them to our point of view, "uplifting" them through our teaching? I'm sure Flood and Raschig don't mean that. Does it mean revising our own political inclinations in light of what these folks have to teach us? Perhaps. But we will have to struggle with the moments when their politics and ours, their understandings and ours, cannot be aligned. Working in faraway places, there may be no chance for political engagement, and thus these questions would not arise. Working at home, it will be hard to avoid them.

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