CONVERSATIONS: SCOTT VIEIRA, COLUMN EDITOR

Cultural Anthropology and Open Access—Interview With Dominic Boyer, Cymene Howe, and Marcel LaFlamme

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ABSTRACT

In this installment of “Conversations,” Dominic Boyer, Cymene Howe, and Marcel LaFlamme, of the Cultural Anthropology editorial team, discuss the ins and outs of publishing a gold open access journal in the field of anthropology. Highlights of the discussion include Cultural Anthropology’s move to open access, the ethics of open access, the growth of international readership, ongoing publishing challenges in open access, and the role libraries can play with open access publishing.

KEYWORDS

cultural anthropology; Cymene Howe; Dominic Boyer; gold open access; international readership; Marcel LaFlamme; publishing; Sound + Vision

Cultural Anthropology (CA), a leading journal in anthropology until recently published by Wiley, moved to open access (OA) in 2014. For this installment of “Conversations,” members of the CA editorial collective, Dominic Boyer (professor and director, Center for Energy and Environmental Research in Human Sciences, Rice University), Cymene Howe (associate professor and associate director, Center for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality, Rice University), and Marcel LaFlamme (managing editor, Cultural Anthropology) join me and guest editor Shannon Kipphut-Smith (scholarly communications liaison, Rice University) to have a conversation about OA publishing.

From 2014 through 2018, Dominic Boyer and Cymene Howe were members of the CA editorial collective with James Faubion. Marcel LaFlamme completed his PhD in the Department of Anthropology at Rice University in 2018 and is currently a Visiting Scholar at the University of Washington. He has served as managing editor of CA since 2015.

Scott Vieira (SV): Some of our readers may not be familiar with CA or its move to the gold OA model. Would you begin by giving us some background?

Dominic Boyer (DB): Sure. CA is a journal that was founded at Rice University in the mid-1980s as a project of the Society for Cultural Anthropology (SCA), a section of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). For the journal’s 30th anniversary, George Marcus—our first editor—wrote an interesting reflection, which illuminates the rationale for the journal’s founding and its subsequent development (Marcus, 2015). Long story short, CA positioned itself as the Anglophone anthropology journal most open to engaging emergent trends. Over the years, it has helped broker a number of important disciplinary discussions on topics ranging from postmodernity to postcolonial studies to queer theory to science and technology studies. More recently, the journal has published a lot of work on cutting-edge topics such as infrastructure, ethics, and multispecies relations. Measured by impact factor, for all its limitations, we are currently the top journal in the AAA’s 23-journal portfolio.

Brad Weiss, former president of the SCA and incoming coeditor of CA, explained the journal’s transition to OA as follows:

In August 2012, the AAA director of publications, Oona Schmid, proposed that one of the publishing sections be permitted to become open access for the duration of the Wiley-Blackwell contract, which expires in December 2017. Our board formed a task force, including some real experts on publishing and open access, and the group determined that it would be worthwhile to pursue this possibility. As it happened, we were the only AAA section that raised its hand, so we were authorized to make the transition. (2014, p. 1)

Indeed, leading figures in SCA, including former CA editors Kim and Mike Fortun, had long been...
advocates for OA publishing, so in the end, the decision to try an OA path forward was made relatively quickly and enthusiastically.

Shannon Kipphut-Smith (SK): CA doesn’t charge article processing charges (APCs). How did you choose your current OA business model? Do you anticipate the model changing in the future?

DB: One of the things we’ve learned at CA since 2014 is that there isn’t an optimal OA business model for a single journal, no matter how prominent and cherished it might be. CA has a lot of status and goodwill going for it, and that has given us a long runway. Currently, we are supported by a combination of cash and in-kind support from the universities that have housed the editorial office—Duke, Rice, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)—and from the SCA membership, whose dues are a significant source of support for the journal. It should also be said that our pre-2014 content remains paywalled, and we receive a fairly substantial stream of royalties, around $20,000 per year, from downloads of that content from Wiley and various third-party aggregators.

The most convincing route forward, in our estimation, is not for CA to further tweak its own business model but rather to enter into a partnership with other journals, libraries, and learned societies to create a new OA publishing ecology in anthropology. One model for this that we have been working to develop is Libraria (http://libraria.cc), which also includes leading OA organizations like the Public Knowledge Project. The basic concept is to redirect flows of funding from for-profit commercial publishers to a not-for-profit publishing cooperative that will be jointly and transparently governed by journals, libraries, and societies. It’s a brilliant model in my view, but it has gained only limited traction with the AAA for reasons that are diverse but which essentially boil down to the association’s financial dependence on the royalties paid by Wiley and its lack of imagination regarding alternative publishing arrangements. So the real issue we are facing at CA is how to move ahead with securing a sustainable future for our own OA experiment while bringing the AAA along at the same time. It’s a bit like a tugboat pulling a battleship.

SK: Has the change for CA to OA lived up to expectations? What has worked well and what has not in moving to an OA model? For example, has the move to gold OA diminished CA’s status as a leading journal in anthropology?

DB: I would say that it has exceeded expectations. I see no downside other than the longer-term financial uncertainty, for which, I’ll just say again, we have viable solutions were the AAA to have the imagination and will to adopt them. At CA, our downloads and page views are skyrocketing, and the various metrics we look at still have us among the top journals in the discipline. But what has surprised me the most is how quickly CA has moved from being a prestigious North American journal to a truly global journal, with a huge boost in readership in places like India and increasing numbers of submissions from scholars positioned around the world. That’s not an accident; OA really works as a way of broadening one’s audience. So, if anything, I would say that our status has increased as a result of our OA transition.

SV: Jason Baird Jackson wrote: “The move to transition CA toward a gold OA model represents a milestone for the iterative transformation of how cultural anthropologists, along with diverse fellow travelers, communicate more ethically and sustainably with global and diverse publics” (2014, p. 263). How important has it been to the anthropology community for CA to move to OA?

Cymene Howe (CH): Jackson’s description is spot on. OA affords anthropologists the ability to communicate more fluidly, without having to overcome paywalls that, as we know, are often extraordinarily costly to scale. In its capacity to create a more sustainable and ethical form of community, OA allows a kind of lateral connectivity that is not possible in an institutionally centered and financially driven model. But for methodological reasons as well, I think it is important that cultural anthropologists have taken up the charge to unlock the data and analysis that we collectively create.

Anthropology as a discipline has, for many, many decades, lauded the importance of sharing our research outcomes with those with whom we have worked in our field research. In past times they were called informants or interlocutors and increasingly collaborators; these are the people who anthropologists talk with, eat with, think with, and spend hundreds, sometimes thousands, of hours with. Many anthropologists have considered it critically important to avoid extracting the content of people’s lives and experiences by locking them away in texts that are inaccessible by virtue of cost, availability, language, or scholarly jargon. Especially for those who reside in the global South, there are many barriers to reading what has been written about them and in many cases in close conversation with them.

Of course, the solution here is more than OA. Academics, especially when writing for a peer-reviewed
journal, will write in the style that is expected, often in challenging, conceptually filigreed prose. Many of our interlocutors and collaborators in the field may not in fact care to “read what we have written,” to paraphrase the title of Caroline Brettell’s (1993) edited volume When They Read What We Write. It is also true that some of our collaborators and interlocutors have access to paywalled domains, especially when we are, to use Laura Nader’s phrase, “studying up” with experts and scientists in the global North. In spite of the multiple contingencies in opening knowledge to wider audiences everywhere, I am certain that cultural anthropologists, on the whole, appreciate the value of sharing their work with the people who have made it possible.

SV: I found Jackson’s characterization of CA’s move to OA as “ethical” interesting (Jackson & Anderson, 2014). Would you characterize a move to OA as ethical? Why or why not?

CH: I think it is fair to say that the move to OA is, in the first instance, an ethical exercise. The primary impetus to create OA platforms is to make scientific information available to any person, anywhere on the planet, without discrimination. By discrimination, I mean to emphasize that in charging for scholarly materials, and by making money or publisher philanthropy, the determining factor of access, we are practicing bias against those without financial means or without certain kinds of institutional and national affiliations. OA is an ethical exercise because it aims toward the egalitarian, at least inasmuch as any portal for digital information can be made available to people who live in the most remote or economically devastated places.

James Faubion, who was another member of our editorial collective at CA, is an expert in the anthropology of ethics—which is, in fact, the title of one of his books (Faubion, 2011). In that book, he uncovers the carefully layered framework of ethics that the theorist Michel Foucault developed over the course of his thinking. What Faubion demonstrates is that ethical practice is not atomic but relational. Ethics are not individuated but instead environmentally conditioned. The “interpretive universe of ethical forms,” he writes, “is one of subjects in, or passing through, positions in environments” (Faubion, 2011, p. 119).

We might make several things of this passage, but to name a couple: It is generous. And, as anthropologists are fond of saying, it is good to think with. If we take OA as an ethics that is environmentally conditioned, then we can begin to look past the author-reader dyad of publication. In the academic universe, there is never just one author for a text, nor is there ever only one reader. Each scholarly book emerges from hundreds of conversations with others, whether in the classroom or over dinner. The same can be said of academic articles, which, by virtue of their form, have often been born in a conference setting, spent their adolescence in workshops being read by friends and colleagues, and, for their final rite of passage, faced the rigors of a double-blind peer review. In other words, there is an ethical environment in which journal articles are made, and there are many checks to create balance along the way.

SV: Outside of providing access to a wider audience, are there other aspects of the editorial and publishing process that OA might benefit or change? Say, for example, peer review—it is not without its problems. Can OA improve this process?

CH: In truth, all of scholarly life is a series of peer reviews, whether on the page or in person during invited talks and other events. The peer review process for any OA journal must be rigorous and may be even more rigorous, given the continued suspicions about predatory publishers that linger around OA. However, the way in which peer review might actually be improved by OA lies in the fact that many, if not all, reviewers and authors see the stakes of contributing to OA projects differently. Writing and reviewing for an OA publication has an ethical component that simply does not exist when one is laboring—without compensation, it is important to note—for a for-profit company. Reviewing for non-OA publications may be in service to science or to one’s discipline. And that is fine. But peer reviewing for a publication that will foster globally accessible knowledge for years to come? That involves a larger ethical calling and a commitment to sharing what we know—because we know we could not have known it alone.

SK: What has changed for CA since moving to OA?

Marcel LaFlamme (ML): My predecessor as managing editor, Tim Elfenbein, made the point that going OA didn’t mean that CA had left publishing. “Rather,” he emphasized, “we have become our own publisher” (Elfenbein, 2014, p. 289). Setting off on our own meant learning to do the many things that our former publisher, Wiley, had done for us. We don’t do all of them in-house, of course, so we had to identify vendors and contractors who could do the things that we’re not set up to do ourselves. We had to refunct our existing website, which was initially developed to present supplemental material and other web content, into a true publishing platform. And, as
any infrastructure provider will tell you, this work is never done: As standards evolve and as interlocking pieces of software are updated or abandoned, these heterogeneous assemblages that we call platforms require ongoing maintenance and repair.

Above all, I would say that the SCA as a scholarly society had to develop publishing expertise. Tim had a jump on that because he came to the journal from a job at Duke University Press, but it was a steep learning curve for me. And because we’re a small organization with limited staff development funds, I couldn’t fly off to every publishing conference that caught my eye. So I did a lot of listening on Twitter, sought out mentors both on- and off-line. Just in the past year or two, we’ve seen the development of resources that didn’t exist when I got started, like the Library Publishing Curriculum that’s being put together by the folks at the Library Publishing Coalition. If we’re serious about building the capacity for academy-owned publishing, then we need to think hard about how and where people in roles like mine are going to cultivate the skills they need and then stay current. I am convinced that no digital tool, however slick, can replace that.

SK: Do you think CA’s move to OA has changed its readership? If so, how?

ML: Yes, as Dominic has said, going OA has allowed us to reach a more diverse and international readership than we were previously reaching. One of my favorite metrics for this is the gap between page visits and downloads. If we look at the data from 2013, the last year that CA was behind a paywall, 42% of visitors to our article pages in Wiley Online Library came from countries beyond the global North. But if we look at article downloads, that number drops to 12%. Now, not every person who visits an article page wants or needs to download the article, but we think it’s safe to say that at least part of that gap can be chalked up to a lack of access: If we look at 2017 data from our website, downloads from beyond the global North jump to almost 20%.

We can also tell this story in a more qualitative way. Our first open-access issue included an article on the subject of anti-immigrant violence and ideas about witchcraft in South Africa (Hickel, 2014). It’s a compelling article, and it was one of our most-read during the year that it was published. But then, in the spring of 2015, a wave of xenophobic attacks broke out across South Africa, with several people killed and hundreds arrested. Suddenly, Hickel’s article was speaking to issues literally torn from the headlines. Over the next three months, the article was accessed over 30,000 times, with fully a third of the page visits and over half of the downloads coming from inside South Africa. We see this episode as one of the early success stories of the journal’s OA era: Rather than belatedly ungating content in response to political upheaval, we were able to provide an anthropological perspective on events on the ground even as they were unfolding.

SV: Media coverage of the journal’s move to OA indicated that the AAA’s publishing partner, Wiley, helped to make the transition possible. Can you explain how? Does this ongoing relationship between a society-owned OA journal and its former publisher cause any tension?

ML: In 2012, the AAA reached an agreement with Wiley for one of its 23 journals to go open access. This came after years of advocacy and reflected a sense among association leadership at the time that exploring new publishing models was a wise thing to do. Now, this move had to receive Wiley’s blessing because the AAA was just halfway through a 10-year publishing contract that it had signed back in 2007. My sense is that Wiley had a certain curiosity about how such a move would impact journal readership. But it also came as a fairly good deal for them: CA would continue to send them our content for inclusion in various Wiley bundles, while we would assume most of the production costs that they had previously borne.

I don’t want to be snarky about this because CA still depends on Wiley in more ways than one. The fact that our content is distributed through their highly sophisticated journal platform means that it is reaching readers. Moreover, as Dominic noted, CA continues to receive royalties from Wiley for our pre-2014 backfiles, which remain gated at this time. We actually have permission to ungate journal content going back to 2004, but, at present, those royalties represent a substantial enough portion of the society’s budget that we can’t afford to forego them. So it would be dishonest for us to throw stones at other sections of the AAA that have grown accustomed to the Wiley payouts. We are stuck in the same cycle of dependency, although we are perhaps working a bit harder to get ourselves unstuck.

What concerns me is that the AAA doesn’t seem to perceive that it has walked into a spider web. In 2017, the association announced that it would seek to create a disciplinary repository for preprints and other scholarly outputs beyond the journal article. A few weeks ago, the association’s president published a feel-good account of how the repository would promote the
“common good” by including other organizational partners (Barker, 2018). What he neglected to mention was that the AAA had selected Atypon, a platform provider acquired by Wiley in 2016, to build the repository. The AAA insists that there are no path dependencies being constructed here. But it’s pretty clear that the author-friendly interoperabilities between the repository and Wiley’s journal platform will make it that much more difficult for the AAA to go its own way once its current contract with Wiley is up in 2022. Make no mistake: The move toward vertical integration on the part of the big commercial publishers is a bid, on the one hand, for insinuating themselves even more intimately into the affairs of societies like the AAA, while on the other, making a play for a larger portion of the university budget than the comparatively small chunk that libraries command (Posada & Chen, 2018).

**SK:** Can you discuss the role libraries have played in supporting CA’s OA work? Are there other things libraries could do to support and encourage OA journals like CA?

**ML:** This is a question that is close to my heart because I went to library school and ran a community college library in Kansas before embarking on my PhD. We’ve had library partners from the start, and what’s remarkable is that they have sustained their commitment to us even in the absence of a direct institutional connection.

For example, after the journal’s editorial office moved to Duke in 2011, the Duke University Libraries agreed to host an instance of Open Journal Systems (OJS) for us. Even before our OA transition, we were using OJS as a submission and review management system. When the Rice team took over in 2015, it would have been totally reasonable for Duke to say, “Well, it’s been a good run.” But they didn’t! They continued to host our OJS instance through 2018 and are now covering part of our hosting costs with the Public Knowledge Project. Some of our friends at the Duke Libraries wrote that they saw this as a way to “support a potentially groundbreaking experiment while both serving [the Libraries’] own mission and helping the journal better serve its own” (Mangiafico & Smith, 2014, p. 227).

Another example is our partnership with the Indiana University (IU) Libraries involving “Sound + Vision,” a new section of the journal that integrates multimedia content into the conventional research article (Boyer, Faubion, Howe, & LaFlamme, 2016). Designing the infrastructure that would deliver this capability was one of my central charges when I was hired as managing editor, and I knew that whatever solution we adopted had to put preservation front and center. A friend pointed me toward the open-source media management system Avalon, and we struck an agreement with IU—which had codeveloped Avalon—to host our media content in their repository. Again, the journal has no formal connection to Indiana University, but the IU Libraries have a track record of partnering with scholarly societies, and I think they were excited about a new-use case for Avalon: We were the first journal to incorporate it into our production process.

So, what else could libraries do? I think it starts with rethinking what we mean by acquisitions and then redirecting resources accordingly, whether that’s to the tune of David Lewis’s (2017) 2.5% commitment to create an open scholarly commons or wherever your library can start. Supporting open scholarship means supporting common-pool resources that you aren’t just buying for your institution. It also means finding ways to sustain that support, even when the next downturn inevitably comes. OA naysayers are often convinced that the only way to ensure sustainability for a journal or a society is to have libraries over a barrel by being able to cut off their access. I’ve written about this, with colleagues, as “a form of coercion” (Brown, LaFlamme, & Lyon, 2018, p. 46), but it’s also a way of managing risk. We need to dream up others.

**SK:** Lastly, where do you see scholarly publishing going over the next 10 years? Describe what we have to look forward to and what challenges we may still see.

**DB:** One of our brilliant coconspirators in the SCA and Libraria, Alberto Corsín Jiménez, believes pretty strongly that the vertically integrated suites of products that Marcel mentioned previously will be the new frontlines of struggle for OA. On the one hand, we have the Wileys and Elseviers fighting with the likes of Academia.edu over analytics and their monetization. On the other, we have ventures like ours trying to shift the whole publishing ecology toward open access and community control. It’s going to be interesting to see how it all develops. But it’s clear we need to broaden the base of support for ethical OA beyond the relatively few who feel passionately about the issue. To this end, Marcel and I have written a short piece to try to better connect the OA movement to other justice-seeking political movements and to suggest that OA can be a tool in their struggles as well (LaFlamme & Boyer, 2018).
CH: The next decade in publishing has amazing potential to encourage, produce, and disseminate new forms of scholarly communication; this is, in large part, because of the digitization of our knowledge forms in the 21st century. With the screen as medium, we have an almost infinite variety of multimodal or multimedia forms that scholarly communication might take: from animation and streaming video to sonic and haptic capacities. As Marcel mentioned, we were able to develop a new section of Cultural Anthropology called “Sound + Vision” that enables researchers to include audio and visual material from their fieldwork, offering an opportunity to invent multimediated experiences as a way to engage with scholarly material. The work of anthropology is lively and animated, often overflowing with voice and sounds and scenes. We wanted to embrace this ethnographic esthetic with “Sound + Vision.” This modality of exposition is the first of its kind in an anthropology journal, and it has garnered significant praise for its pedagogical value in the classroom as well as for the multimodal opportunities it affords authors.

It is important to note, however, that creating multimediated ways to engage with research is not just a nice way to decorate an article. In fact, it changes the proportions of scholarly communication from text-heavy to experience-aware, making material more available to different encounters, different “readers” (who might learn differently, who might not read English fluently, etc.). In multimediating elements of our research, we are actively expanding the way that material can be taken in and digested. When we add in the global, free accessibility that OA provides, we are exponentially increasing that potential because not only is the material differently accessible by virtue of being driven by images or sound or animation, it is available to anyone with access to the Internet and a screen. “Sound + Vision” is just one example of how we can enhance the reach and impact of scholarly work, and I am certain that the next 10 years will show us more technical capacities and modalities. I myself am hoping for a scratch-and-sniff-able article.

A central challenge going forward will be to continue rebalancing the canonical literature to be more inclusive of a diversity of analytical perspectives. In the academy, canon making happens through citation: who gets cited and who doesn’t, which insights are recognized, and which insights are never tested because they are never adequately circulated through citational channels. In my published work, I have always aimed to create bibliographies that are attentive to balancing the work of people of color, of women, and of scholarship from the global South. For some topics, this has sometimes meant searching out emerging scholars who are not following the conventional routes of the Euro-American academy. In part because of the Internet—and to a degree, OA publishing—work by scholars from the global South is more accessible now than ever before. However, it remains the case that scholarship that is not featured in prestigious (usually English-language) journals or presses simply does not accrue the same citational recognition or circulation (Howe, Faubion, & Boyer, 2018, p. 523). As a discipline, anthropology fares better than some on this count, but there is certainly room for inclusive growth and for decolonizing the discipline along these lines. This same logic of decolonizing can be extended across the Euro-American academy and to the publications produced within it (Piron, 2018).

In the coming years, it is important that journal editors and authors continue to be attuned to the inequalities that still exist in authorship and citational practices. These imbalances happen at multiple levels based on any number of the following: geolocation (global South versus global North); gender; generation (early-career versus established scholars); race and ethnicity; institutional status (elite private universities versus underresourced institutions); language barriers (e.g., nonnative English speakers/writers); and class status and other forms of precarious subjectivity within the academic milieu. In selecting contributors for our recent book, The Anthropocene Unseen: A Lexicon (Howe & Pandian, 2018), my coeditor and I were eager to include essays from less-established scholars, from all parts of the world. The resulting table of contents reflects that ambition. In deciding to work with Punctum Books, a scholar-led OA publisher, we redoubled our commitment to making the work available to a broad global audience and to giving our authors that kind of visibility and citational circulation. Over the next decade, I think we need to continue to be vigilant about bibliographic biases that favor certain authors over others, ensuring that a breadth of thinking is represented in the published work we support. It is a responsibility that we have as authors, editors, and teachers.

ML: I’ll just add a note that might be of particular interest to your readers, as serials librarians. The fact is that the journal form has come under critique, as the locus of an overidentification with brand that is said to detract from the evaluation of scholarship on its own merit. For these critics, and they include many smart people with whom I am otherwise in
accord, the journal is an inefficiency that needs to be transcended if science is to reach its full potential.

I do not share this view. Earlier this fall, I submitted an article based on a chapter from my dissertation to an anthropology journal based in the United Kingdom. I chose this journal because it is well regarded but also because it has nurtured a particular conversation in which I am trying to intervene. Many, though not all, of the articles that have advanced this line of analysis have appeared in the pages of this journal. So seeking to publish my article there is also a way of situating myself as a scholar in relation to conversations that I think are valuable and that I perceive myself as being in a position to help move forward. I worry that abandoning the journal form in favor of the free-floating article or the data set behind it will make that relational work more difficult or force us to simply recreate it in some other context.

The future of the journal itself is, for me, the issue to wrestle with as we look ahead to the next 10 years of scholarly publishing. Will the people who are reading these words in the late 2020s know what a serial is or why a special kind of librarian was charged with its care?

SV: Shannon and I want to thank all of you for taking the time to discuss OA and your work with CA.

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