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To cite this article: Elizabeth F. S. Roberts (2021) Let Us Please Depart the Echo Chamber, Anthropology Now, 13:1, 79-85, DOI: [10.1080/19428200.2021.1903584](https://doi.org/10.1080/19428200.2021.1903584)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19428200.2021.1903584>



Published online: 15 Jun 2021.



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Part 1: The Problem

Cultural anthropology is mostly irrelevant. It only talks to itself. It could burn to the ground and no one would bother to examine the wreckage or even care to wonder what ignited the blaze. It shouldn't be this way. Cultural anthropology's fundamental method—ethnography—is a formidable and extraordinary tool for approaching and understanding the horrific messes the world now faces; global warming, monstrous racial and economic inequality, the COVID-19 pandemic and on and on.

I know just how powerful ethnography is from my work developing a collaborative multidisciplinary research platform with environmental health and environmental engineers in Mexico City.¹ Together we have been working to make “bioethnographic” knowledge about the relationship of chemical exposure and water distribution to health and inequality, using all the methodological tools at our disposal. Over time, I have been able to demonstrate to my collaborators that foregrounding rigorous, theoretically informed ethnographic methods is crucial for making better knowledge about complex problems.² I have made the case to them that ethnography must come first before decid-

ing what hypotheses to test or what data to collect.

Compared with most other disciplines engaged in empirical research, ethnography is both radically open ended and radically narrow. It involves long-term work with a small number of people who often have quite different commitments and experiences than that of the researcher. Ethnography's attention to these complexities and differences tends to produce better knowledge about complex problems than research which assumes it knows in advance what the questions are.

It's through the slow unfolding of ethnography that what matters emerges. Historically, anthropologists have tended to work with groups who disrupt business as usual—anarchists, activists, rural people, shanty towns, dwellers, the sick, the devout, the disenfranchised, the dispossessed. Ethnographic attunement to those who disrupt demonstrates how people live life in surprising, perplexing and wonderous ways. And now anthropologists also study power. They study people who make knowledge, make policy, make numbers and make a whole lot of money. And yet anthropological knowledge about how to live in the world otherwise, like the disruptors, and how those in power have created such damage has had very little impact.

Our lack of effect partially comes from the fact that, on its own, ethnography is poorly equipped to produce bite-size chunks of data, especially numbers. Ethnographers do not make, and often revile, the numbers that make the world go round because numbers reduce complexity and can be used for ill. But while ethnographers have documented

the problems with numbers over and over, no one seems to listen.³ For instance, anthropologists have shown that pandemic bonds, which are supposed to pay out to countries devastated by infectious diseases like Ebola, are “triggered” by case numbers that don’t count what they say they count and are based on the faulty assumption that profitable numbers will alleviate global health problems.⁴ It is crucial to recognize, though, that those who routinely make and use numbers are not going to give them up. So what if instead of only critiquing numbers-making disciplines, anthropologists collaborated to make better numbers, numbers that didn’t flatten what matters.

Combined with other methods, ethnography could matter mightily in making better numbers. But researchers who make other kinds of knowledge and the people who make things happen with that knowledge have to know about and value ethnography’s power. They don’t, though, and won’t unless cultural anthropology systematically changes how it works, not only engaging in critique but also working with others to make knowledge that matters.

That’s what I have been trying to do in my collaboration with environmental health and environmental engineers. I carried out intensive ethnographic research in working-class neighborhoods in Mexico City in 2014 and 2015. This slow open-ended investigation allowed for surprises. My assistant and I found that toxicity might be protective against larger harms such as the police, that green space might be dangerous to working-class neighborhood cohesion and that water made no sense to drink.⁵ My collaborators and I are now working to test these insights, and that

testing involves making numbers, for which I need to be accountable. In our collaboration, ethnographic insight formulated the problem and remains central during the entire iterative process, through to analysis.

For ethnography to become an “obligatory passage point” more widely, cultural anthropology has to leave the echo chamber. It has to stop only talking to itself. It needs to be part of making the data that are taken into account. It needs to work to make coproduced data that anthropologists are happy with and for which they can take responsibility. Alongside ethnography of, cultural anthropology needs to develop more ways to do an ethnography with.

By calling for an ethnography *with*, I do not mean cultural anthropologist should now carry out ethnography with collaborators in tow. Only one or two ethnographers at a time can fit into the kitchens, shop floors, alleys and rallies where the phenomena that matter slowly becomes clear.

Cultural anthropologists are in better positions to do this team-based work more than ever. Our still incomplete reckoning with our problematic past has pushed us, albeit imperfectly, to expand who does anthropology. Additionally, cultural anthropology has reframed its object of study, now refusing the nature/culture divide. We no longer agree to the terms of this division, where we focus solely on what people believe, feel or express as “culture,” while the hard scientists investigate the material world of real objects. This subject/object divide, which underwrote colonial, capitalist, racist and genocidal knowledge and resource extraction for the past 500 years, ignored the relations that produce things and people. Now,

as best they can, anthropologists try to understand people as made through relations with everything else, chemicals, deities, financial instruments, paperwork, buildings, aquifers and fibers. Both of these changes make us better positioned to collaborate. But anthropology still has enormous work to do to make ethnography matter.

Of course, cultural anthropologists have a history of collaboration, but they are usually idiosyncratic one-offs, and they don't tend to train graduate students in how to make ethnography matter. Sometimes cultural anthropologists collaborate with the disenfranchised, seeking to raise their voices, so they count. Some ethnographers, especially those with tenure, have created long-term collaborations with other experts, who are more apt to be heard; architects, lawyers, public health researchers.⁶ But in each of these collaborations, it's like cultural anthropologists must reinvent the wheel anew without making the process stick with any lasting institutional structures.

There is also a long and robust practice of ethnographers working as contract or applied anthropologists. These ethnographers are most often hired by researchers who have already determined the object of study, or they are asked to consult on data after the data have been gathered. This work has been valuable, but it does not have the capacity to demonstrate how, if ethnography is made Step 1, it can radically reformulate the phenomena in question. To allow ethnography to work properly, anthropologists need to be there at the start, not as employees, consultants, auxiliaries or handmaids, but as formulators of the research vision. Cultural anthropologists know how important this is because ethnographers who conduct ethnography of the research process, often find that it's the re-

search itself that reinforces the status quo, often producing the reality it seeks to find.

Part 2: The Fixes

The five recommendations I make next for making ethnography matter come from my work collaborating with environmental health scientists and environmental engineers. Making ethnography matter to my coinvestigators and combining our methodologies to make truly multidisciplinary knowledge has been a slow, complex, impure, compromising and arduous process. I began this work in 2012, and it still often feels like we are in early days. Thus, these recommendations are partial and in process.

Through this work I have had the opportunity to collaboratively train graduate students in engineering, biological anthropology, political science, environmental health and nutrition, as well as undergraduate students across the social sciences in our undergraduate ethnographic coding lab. But cultural anthropology, at least where I work and teach, is not set up to include graduate student ethnographers in this research process. Part of my motivation for writing this article is to lay out some of the barriers to training cultural anthropology graduate students in multidisciplinary research. The other is to envision how we could restructure cultural anthropology departments to make ethnography matter.

1. Robust and Independent Anthropology Departments

For anthropologists to demonstrate the value of critically informed ethnography, anthro-

pologists need their own vibrant departments where they can engage in theory making and practice among themselves. Inside anthropology departments, anthropologists do in fact need the echo chamber, where they get to have wonky, satisfying discussions with colleagues with whom they have a shared language. Many cultural anthropologists will continue to work as lone anthropologists, and I intend to continue learn from them. This is where my theories of the world and how to do ethnography are constantly challenged. In my case, critically engaged theory that implodes nature/culture divides has been key for effective multidisciplinary collaboration with science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) colleagues.

In collaboration, cultural anthropologists need to be able to position themselves as equals operating in their own departments, as they pool methods with collaborators to collectively make knowledge about phenomena of mutual concern. If my appointment were in public health, medicine or engineering, the power of ethnography would be harder to maintain. I would become beholden to the funding and publication metrics of STEM fields and serve as an auxiliary consultant after the fact of data collection.

2. More Than Culture

To collaborate in making knowledge that matters, cultural anthropologists need to expand their ethnographic attentions beyond “culture,” examining phenomena through all the relations that make them. By focusing on relations, anthropologists avoid being pigeonholed by our collaborators as only able

to make knowledge about the attitudes and beliefs that they associate with culture, leaving the world of objective material objects to them.

To give an example, I spent years carrying out fieldwork on daily life in working-class households in Mexico City and developed a sense that household water management and gender co-constituted each other, but I could not quite articulate how. After spending a few months in participant households, an engineering graduate student on our field team, who had never studied gender, made a possible link between the intermittent water supply and women’s capacity to work outside the household. If women need to be at home when the water arrives because the household water system must be activated manually, they might not be able to seek formal sector work. In this case, collaboration between two kinds of experts made it possible for both of us to apprehend a potentially key sociotechnical system that neither of us had the capacity to fathom on our own. Instead of cordoning off my work as culture and his as engineering, we had pooled methods to know the relations that produced matters of concern for both of us.

3. Funding Structures and Workload

If cultural anthropologists are to carry out multidisciplinary work that makes ethnography Step 1, anthropologists, other scholars and university administrators need to recognize that many anthropology departments are not well structured for this kind of team-based work. Managing teams and supervising graduate student training takes an extraordinary

amount of effort and responsibility. Although meetings with collaborators are usually engaging, they are endless. It is simply not possible to do this work in any ongoing meaningful way and teach a standard course load in cultural anthropology. This enormous hurdle needs to be addressed at the level of university administration, which in theory should embrace multidisciplinary work and making knowledge that matters. Administrators need to understand that team-based work with graduate students is a kind of teaching, and that this new approach would be good for graduate students in the long run.

Additionally, the granting agencies where anthropologists usually apply do not usually have sufficient funds to buy out teaching or support team-based work. Anthropologists could work to change this to both fund graduate students to become part of the research and very importantly to obtain funds that will allow anthropologists the capacity to act as principal investigators. Part of the reason I could make ethnography Step 1 in my current collaboration was through a specific funding mechanism at the NSF that awarded \$1 million for projects that drew together disciplines that don't usually work together (e.g., cultural anthropology and engineering). We need more funding mechanisms like this.

4. Graduate Student Training

Cultural anthropology needs new models for graduate training, where students can develop their dissertation research through work with multidisciplinary teams. This would give them a means, early on, to make their knowledge matter. There are huge bar-

riers, though, to making this project-based approach to graduate training possible. First, funding models would have to change for graduate students who wanted to develop their research through a multidisciplinary team. Perhaps cultural anthropologists could work with funding agencies to develop a track for graduate students to apply for stand-alone funding to work as part of a team. And then cultural anthropology would have to reimagine how to evaluate candidates for entry-level tenure track positions. Cultural anthropologists would need to recognize that they want job candidates to display rugged individualism in their ethnographic work. This sits somewhat uncomfortably next to their criticism of STEM fields for assuming that individuals are the "natural" unit of study, at the expense of larger groups, such as households and neighborhoods. Without the kind of reorientation I am recommending, graduate students who carried out their ethnographic work as part of a team would not be viable job candidates.

One way forward could be developing a program track within anthropology departments that would train students in rigorous social theory while carrying out their dissertation research through participation in multidisciplinary projects. Students would prepare for open-ended ethnographic research related to the problem under study. Along the way, they would develop skills for keeping numerical project data (e.g., epigenetic tags, toxin levels) tethered to the complexity of their own ethnographic findings. Students could also participate in dual training, such as engineering, epidemiology and media production. This would provide them with

the capacity to develop their own multidisciplinary research projects upon graduation.

Some programs have already developed multidisciplinary approaches, and cultural anthropology could look to them for models. Graduate students in anthropology at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, can participate in an interdisciplinary program in Transformative Research in Urban Sustainability Training, alongside urban planners, engineers, biologists and physiologists,⁷ and Kaleidos, an interdisciplinary program in Ecuador, trains graduate students as part of teams with researchers from other disciplines.⁸

5. Humility and Generosity

Cultural anthropologists are neither trained in nor typically inclined toward team-based work, even among themselves. They usually work as lone wolf ethnographers. In contrast, collaboration is constitutional for almost every other field within which cultural anthropologists might work. Thus, potential collaborators have invaluable experience in how to collaborate. While ethnography instills a built-in humility about knowing the world, I have been repeatedly humbled by my incapacity at making knowledge with others, despite what I thought of as my fabulous people skills. By failing to first consult with my colleagues about how they usually do things in teams, I have made countless mistakes in managing our collaborations—in the nitty gritty of data collection, data management, the Institutional Review Board process and authorship agreements. I have had to learn that I don't know what I don't know, while my colleagues are likely to already have sys-

tems in place to manage processes I have yet to apprehend.

Cultural anthropologists also need to cultivate deep generosity, as this kind of work requires the realization that the seemingly strange, maddening and imperfect ways of collaborators occur in good faith. Their difference has everything to do with how their knowledge making is shaped by funding structures, disciplinary norms and intuitions they must report to. Their ecologies are very different than that of cultural anthropology. And cultural anthropology looks equally strange and imperfect from where they sit as well.

Writing about the complexity of food policy, class and politics in the U.S., the historian Melanie Dupuis called for a fermentative politics. "Fermentation is what happens when autonomous groups define themselves but also come together to make a third thing, in the same way that bacteria comes together to make bread, beer or the human body."⁹ In proposing a more robust approach to food policy, Dupuis argues as much against the politics of purity espoused by advocates for rigid definitions of organic agriculture as she does against those who promote corporate agribusiness. I'm drawn to Dupuis's vision of fermentative politics since it resonates with my sense that to make new kinds of knowledge, robust collaborations can come from disciplines that should remain autonomous. Dupuis also reminds us that fermentation smells bad. It's not pretty. And it's not pure. By leaving the echo chamber of cultural anthropology (at least some of the time), anthropologists will lose out on the purity of full-time critique. And by making smelly things, like numbers, cultural anthropologists will begin

to make ethnography matter, which is what the world urgently needs.

Notes

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Elizabeth F.S. Roberts is an professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan, who investigates scientific and public health knowledge production and its embodied effects in Latin America and the United States. She currently collaborates with engineers and environmental health scientists in the United States and Mexico as part of two ongoing team-based projects in Mexico City that she directs: "Mexican Exposures: A Bioethnographic Approach to Health and Inequality" and "Neighborhood Environments as Socio-Techno-bio Systems: Water Quality, Public Trust, and Health in Mexico City" (NESTSMX). In these projects, she and her team trace the looping social, economic, biological, and technical processes that shape everyday life, health, and inequality in working class neighborhoods. One of the key aims of Professor Roberts' current work is the development of bioethnography, a method that combines social and life sciences approaches in order to make better knowledge about health and inequality. Dr. Roberts' earlier research focused on assisted reproduction in the United States and Ecuador, reproductive governance in Latin America, and transnational medical migrations. She is the author of the book *God's Laboratory: Assisted Reproduction in the Andes* (U.C. California Press 2012) and is currently finishing a book manuscript called "In Praise of Addiction."