

Afterword: Critical Reflections on the Processes of Publishing about Diversity

Teaching Anthropology Editorial Board
Special Issue Editorial Collective

In alignment with the aims of our Special Issue, this Afterword seeks to reveal the hidden challenges and pitfalls which were encountered in bringing this publication on diversity in anthropology to fruition. This Afterword has been written as a collaboration between the Special Issue Editorial Collective and the Teaching Anthropology Editorial Board, with feedback from some of the Special Issue authors who were directly impacted during this process.

From the outset, the Special Issue Editorial Collective were aware of and welcomed the potential for disruption to the systems, structures, and actors of anthropology following the publication of this collection. What we did not anticipate, perhaps naïvely, was that this disruption would occur during the editorial process itself. In bringing together these papers, the Collective invited papers which named structural violence and its perpetrators as an exercise in truth-telling and in solidarity with the experiences of those whose voices are often silenced by institutions whose primary investment lies in the continuation of the status quo. However, what we failed to do was to engage in early and continuous dialogue about the impact of this truth-telling with the multiple stakeholders of this Special Issue, including the authors and the Teaching Anthropology Editorial Board.

After we had provided initial editorial feedback to our authors, they began to formally submit their papers to Teaching Anthropology. It was during this process that we discovered there were a few significant differences between what we as the Collective considered to be appropriate and morally required for a publication designed as a catalyst for change, and what the Teaching Anthropology Editorial Board viewed as both ethically and legally sound. As a result, it was some of our authors who experienced the brunt of this misalignment. Over time this led to dissatisfaction, confusion, anger and ironically, a failure to resolve tense feelings of marginalisation that led to several withdrawals amongst authors and editors.

As the Special Issue Editorial Collective, we felt a great responsibility to find a solution to this rift to honour the investment of time and emotion which our authors, ourselves, and the Teaching Anthropology Editorial Board had given towards publishing this Special Issue. We thus began to open lines of communication with the affected authors to find out what had happened, and then with the Editorial Board, to see what could be done to mend damaged relationships and begin to account for the mistakes which were made by ourselves and by the Editorial Board to find a way forward for all. This Afterword was one of the key recommendations made by our authors to make visible that which had occurred between them and the Teaching Anthropology Editorial Board. It is intended that our openness here about such challenges will help generate meaningful change in the way diversity is discussed in academic forums.

Together the Special Issue Editorial Collective and Teaching Anthropology Editorial Board offer this Afterword to highlight the unequivocal need for collaborative dialogue during the process, and prior to engaging with those taking risks, to critically address voices calling out structural violence in academia. We must accept that friction is inevitable when using content that challenges the false ideal of academia as a safe space by making visible the significant resistance mounted by institutions against marginalised folk and their perspectives on diversity. From an editorial perspective, the Teaching Anthropology Editorial Board learned that seeking legal advice can severely restrict our ability to make decisions on submitted papers, closing down the potential for further discussion and compromises. The Editorial Board found itself in a difficult position, being professionally obligated to consider the legal ramifications of what is published in Teaching Anthropology, but ethically invested in facilitating the speaking of truth to power, especially where this is the explicit intention of a Special Issue.

We apologise to authors who experienced harm as a result of our handling of this process or who felt dismissed or confronted by our approach to communication, and we have learned to adopt a critical and candid approach to anxiety about legal risks and communicating this anxiety going forward. Further, involving named institutions, even where the intention may be to diffuse potential repercussions from publishing for both authors and the journal, can rapidly escalate the problems associated with publishing de-identified content and potentially put authors and editors at risk of further harm. Attempting to publish content that explicitly names institutions and individuals can generate significant risk for both authors and editors. Where candid papers are being discussed, it is not enough to contact only the named corresponding author, but better to gain written agreement and acknowledgement from all co-authors and co-editors on how they wish to proceed. Looking forward, the Teaching Anthropology Editorial Board consider de-identifying sources and content to be a key protocol and minimum basis to encourage and engage diverse voices safely.

Reflecting on the processes and effects of the publication process allows us to consider the impact of disruption. We noticed that when conversations initially went quiet, there were sub-conversations occurring to clarify understanding and to obtain reassurance. This made resolution difficult and for some time it seemed unlikely; at points it was uncomfortable. Many of us involved in this project felt that when the editorial process initially failed it was not always a case of good intentions gone wrong, but rather structural issues that were critiqued at the heart of certain contributions – namely that when forms of discrimination such as racism are raised the first reaction by those in authority positions is to protect or defend those who are accused of it and the institutional frameworks which sustain it.

We have learned that accountability and continuous and transparent dialogue are essential to the work of disruption with a view to making concrete change. We hope that this Afterword reads as a lesson for all those who seek to publish these much-needed dialogues on diversity work in anthropology and beyond. And we thank all the authors and editors for their thinking and energy, and for patiently accompanying us on this journey towards greater inclusion.