

ESTABLISHING DIALOGUE AMONG INTERNATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL COMMUNITIES

WAN Collective

The World Anthropologies Network (WAN) provides a forum for understanding the multiple and situated power relationships that shape particular ways of doing anthropology worldwide. It is also a project of intervention to legitimize the voices of other forms of anthropology, one which recognizes these forms as anthropological knowledge in their own right, independent of, yet in conversation with, hegemonic centers of knowledge around the world.

Network participants seek to affect the communicative practices and modes of exchange among world anthropologists through their critical analysis. The aim in doing so is to constantly localize the epistemological, theoretical, methodological and political horizons of the discipline. At the same time we strive to generate conditions for horizontal conversations among anthropologists worldwide. Rather than a project to enrich historically hegemonic forms of anthropology, we hope to create “networked” environments that will allow for a pluralistic discipline that thrives on both its localness and its dialogue across multiple place-based perspectives across the globe.

We criticize the monotonous character of the current international landscape of anthropology and its tendency to reproduce the voices of particular elites around the world. We propose instead that every form of anthropology is local, including those emerging from metropolitan centers. Assuming the singularity and specificity of all forms of anthropology is important, we believe, for the expansion of the discipline beyond its established boundaries.

Predicaments and Proposals

One of anthropology’s paradoxes is its claim to be a universal discipline in spite of its Western foundations. The strongest criticisms of this disciplinary tension between universalism and particularism came from those who identified a close relationship between anthropology and colonialism or imperialism. Yet anthropologists worldwide are not consistently discussing the current nature of their practices in light of new realities in our current global political-economy, nor are anthropologists considering the fate of anthropology on a truly global scale.

Rather than leading to the dismantling of standardized forms and practices of anthropology, most critiques of the discipline have resulted—unwittingly—in the very reinvigoration and worldwide expansion of these standards through elite centers of anthropological production. While these criticisms have questioned standard forms of anthropological knowledge and political practices, they have not impinged on the institutionalization of the discipline itself. Furthermore, dialogues between central and peripheral anthropological institutions continue to contribute to the peripheral ones becoming marginalized by or absorbed into the central ones.

WAN differs from these past critiques within and outside dominant forms and centers of anthropology in significant ways. We believe that globalization has opened up heterodox

opportunities to the academic world, and that through concerted political action more diverse, democratic and transnational communities of anthropologists can develop. At the same time, we do not write from a particular national viewpoint, nor do we wish to advocate for any particular one. Rather, we think that the dominance of some styles of anthropology stems from a geopolitics of knowledge that affects all anthropologists both structurally and historically, and hence encroaches on our own individual experiences within the academic world system. The networks WAN therefore envisions should affect the intersection of personal and institutional practices, working against universal hierarchies of knowledge and towards more critical and inclusive practices of knowledge production.

Knowledge Production

WAN focuses on how standard forms of anthropology subordinate peripheral ones, and encourages the development of a system that will provide a forum for those forms of knowledge that elites ignore, disqualify or subordinate through their standard practices. Thus, WAN works against—or at the very least in tension with—the tendencies to standardize or universalize anthropological knowledge. WAN is an attempt to visualize and foster systems of anthropology in all their multiplicity, both inside and outside academia. Rather than “improving” a single anthropology—by “correcting” its “errors”—we want to make visible the tensions that make anthropology possible.

Anyone doing anthropology, according to WAN participants, is capable of dialogically contributing to the construction of diverse forms of global knowledge with local vocations. We envision the possibility of establishing a multivalent system of practicing anthropology, one based on the multiplicity of voices and positions existing outside hegemonic centers of anthropological production. This does not mean, however, we claim for any sort of apartheid of the local, or for the development of a movement of non-US anthropologists endowed with privileged or authoritative positions of marginality. As a networked group WAN is concerned with the political conditions of anthropological knowledge production at large. If the central feature of Western knowledge, including anthropology, is its expansive claim to universality, how are we to make it different?

WAN as Process, Method and Content

Looking for an answer to this question of how to make Western knowledge different, we considered the creation of a flexible structure or network to foster dialogues and exchanges among a number of diverse anthropologists. Our long-term aim is to develop a self-organizing world network for anthropological research and action that at the same time aims at continuously questioning conventional academic and non-academic forms of knowledge.

We envision a World Anthropologies Network as a consciously de-centered, self-organizing process with emergent properties of its own. Obviously we cannot anticipate these as they will depend on the dynamics set in motion. Our goal is to produce a processual network, which should result in a loose and multidirectional articulation of a variety of forms of anthropology connected through shared interests, complementarities and even tensions. The network should set in motion historically situated conversations and actions on prevalent anthropological concerns, such as culture and nature, the global and local and the political economy of resources.

The form adopted by the network is of crucial importance—rather than a method, a set of contents or an objective, we consider the World Anthropologies Network itself to be a fusion of these three aspects. This network should be a venue for the constant interlocking of place-based nodal points—be these theoretical, political, communicational or institutional—in such a

way that their stability, while existing, is constantly exposed to other possible forms. We think of this hybrid form as a permanent act of connecting and thus articulating the network that constantly re-generates itself and nourishes the forms of knowledge and politics interlocked and produced through it.

The network will avoid replicating the static organizational styles available at present, although we recognize these structures have a part to play in anthropology. Yet, we want to provide a pliable, critical structure with the capacity for being constantly reformulated, for constantly considering centrifugal demands and incorporating them into its many nodes of articulation.

WAN as an Intellectual Attitude

WAN should be seen as an intellectual attitude that gains its strength from its capacity for constant transformation as it exposes itself to local knowledge-practices without absorbing them. As a project capable of being situated in multiple locales, its primary motive is communication, recognizing the role of dialogue in forging needed political alliances between a range of diverse anthropologists and anthropological entities. Such dialogue is necessary for the dynamic production of knowledge that is both coherent, yet differently articulated, and that has a direction in spite of being open-ended.