

WRITING ANTHROPOLOGY

ESSAYS ON CRAFT & COMMITMENT

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rereading all the comments from the reviewers, I was struck by several statements about the need for more context that I had not noticed six years earlier. Her story needed more space than an article permitted; it was time to propose a book. The proposal landed on the desk of a sympathetic editor, and in 2015 I tore open a box from the publisher, lifting out a copy of my book with Ellingson's picture on the cover.³

The interesting question that arises from this story is whether or not the peer-review process failed in this instance. I don't think it did. With each rejection I rewrote the article to address concerns that the reviewers raised, which improved it a great deal. Ultimately being forced to tell the story in a book rather than an article allowed me to explore the objections raised by the reviewers in more detail and supply much more context than was possible in an article. Writing a book rather than an article also provided me the opportunity to quote extensively from Ellingson's own letters and writings, allowing her to regain her voice, which was one of my goals. I don't hesitate to say that the book is significantly better than the article. The reviews written to date confirm that publication as a book was the right choice.⁴ The many letters that I have received from readers, some of whom had experiences similar to Ellingson's, also demonstrate that this was a story that had to be told. The peer-review process can feel soul crushing, but what doesn't kill a publication-worthy article or book only makes it stronger.

Notes

An earlier version of this essay appeared online in *Savage Minds: Notes and Queries in Anthropology*, February 23, 2015.

1. David Robinson, *Excavations at Olynthus VII: The Terra-Cottas of Olynthus Found in 1931* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1933); David Robinson, *Excavations at Olynthus XIV: Terracottas, Lamps, and Coins Found in 1934 and 1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1952).

2. Stephen Dyson, *Ancient Marbles to American Shores* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 86.

3. Alan Kaiser, *Archaeology, Sexism and Scandal: The Long-Suppressed Story of One Woman's Discoveries and the Man Who Stole Credit for Them* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).

4. "Archaeology, Sexism and Scandal/Reviews," Rowman and Littlefield, accessed April 28, 2017, <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442230033>.

30

WHEN THEY DON'T LIKE WHAT WE WRITE

Criticism of Anthropology as a Diagnostic of Power

Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar

"She looks like a chimp to me no offense intended to the apes."

"I hate to stoop this low, but you can tell just by looking at her that her driveway doesn't go all the way to the road. #justsayin"

Over the course of twenty-four hours in spring 2017, anthropologist after anthropologist—all organizers of the AAA campaign to boycott Israeli academic institutions—were trolled on Twitter after the website Canary Mission launched negative profiles of them. As of May 22, 2017, this website claimed to "document the people and groups that are promoting hatred of the USA, Israel, and Jews on college campuses in North America" but in fact circulates libelous portrayals of respected scholars and student activists who are critical of US and Israeli government policies. The website and Twitter trolls accused us and our colleagues of things like being "sick and mentally disabled," "degenerate," "evil," "ugly," and "anti-Semitic" among other racist, gendered remarks such as those quoted above. Anthropologists have always risked harassment when they write critically about racism, sexism, and state power, but such attacks have increased with the advent of the internet. The infamy of outlets such as Canary Mission (and Campus Watch before it) and cases like that of Nadia Abu El-Haj, who faced a tenure battle because of

her scholarship on Israel, has trained anthropologists' attention on the most extreme forms of reprisal. But there is another realm of politicized pushback that may or may not be called harassment but that is critical to analyze if we are to fully understand the relationship between knowledge and power. Here we mean both the structures of power that shape our writing and those that our writing challenges. Less overt forms of resistance to our writing can also serve as a helpful diagnostic that reveals pressure points on our scholarship about which we may be unaware. These often come from within our disciplines but connect to forms of power beyond.

At the final stage of drafting our book *Anthropology's Politics: Disciplining the Middle East* (2016), we received unexpected resistance from some of our interlocutors that revealed both generational forms of sexism and classism that persist in the discipline, as well as an underrecognized dimension of the observer/observed relationship. Before publishing, we decided to check anthropologists' quotations and specific mentions of interview material with them. Numerous colleagues wanted to change their recorded speech to make it more polished, to avoid sounding incoherent or "dumb." We granted these requests, noting how frequently our interlocutors chose to delete precisely those little "uhs" and "ums" that anthropologists have often analyzed. These small deletions show the pressures that scholars experience to shape their speech as "articulate" as they are socialized into academe and away from generational, gendered, and classed speech practices. Even more revealing to us were refusals to include specific interview material and refusals to allow our interpretations of that material to stand. In one case an anthropologist vehemently denied saying sexist things in the interview and patronizingly rejected our interpretation of parts of our exchange. Such challenges came mostly from senior white men, who sometimes reproduced the sexism they wished to erase in the emails requesting the erasure. Although we had of course known that academe was not a realm free of sexist rhetoric and practice, the details of these interactions reminded us of the persistence of sexism in anthropology and revealed the ways in which it is connected to generational and racialized hierarchies.

Analyzing peer review can also be diagnostic of power. As we discuss briefly in our book, reviews of anthropological scholarship on the Middle East sometimes expose anti-Muslim, anti-Arab bias. A few years ago we were invited to contribute an essay for an edited volume, which elicited such a response. Our essay analyzed the stereotyping and generalizing about Middle Eastern Muslims found in feminist anthropology and the racism and sexism that Middle Eastern/Muslim scholars face from their own colleagues.

Peer reviews, while containing some good suggestions for substantiating our claims, were generally hostile to those claims in ways that reveal the nexus in academe of Zionism, second-wave white feminism, the equalizing relativist impulse in anthropology, and liberalism. For example, when we highlighted the specific forms of discrimination perpetrated by academics against their Muslim/Middle Eastern colleagues, we received numerous comments essentially stating that "other minorities face this too," thereby diminishing our analysis of Islamophobia's specificities. Even more revealing were comments suggesting that these colleagues were not "of color," thereby challenging our description of this discrimination as related to the racialization of Muslims/Middle Easterners, about which there is an entire body of scholarly literature. Ironically, some of the feedback reproduced the stereotypes of the Middle East that our essay challenged. We were told that female scholars cannot research men because the region is gender segregated, that authoritarian regimes in the region are "Islamic," and that, in response to our statement that racism against Middle Eastern scholars must be understood in the context of US and Israeli colonialism and imperialism, "Wahhabi [sic] funds in the region . . . teach about a very conservative, fundamental Islam [that is also] a form of imperialism." Indeed, it was our analysis of Zionism in anthropology that received the most intense pushback. Reviewers countered our claims by first affirming their bona fides as critics of Israel and then resorting to two well-worn rhetorical strategies: arguing that Zionism should not be "singled out" from other forms of imperialism and falsely accusing us of "conflate[ing] Israel/Zionism with all Jews in the US academy," a subtle insinuation of anti-Semitism. They also ignored our ethnographic data and experience, taking issue with our argument that Zionist assumptions have dominated many sectors of the academy, dismissing our over forty years of combined experience of this and our published book on this topic that is based on empirical data.

These examples of pushback during the process of publishing anthropological writing expose new angles on several aspects of power at the heart of academic knowledge production, including the efforts of external groups to sully scholars' reputations; the power of anthropologists to control the appearance and interpretation of their interlocutors' speech; the self-disciplining of academic speech in relation to gender, generation, and class; the subtle and not-so-subtle persistence of stereotypes about Muslims and Arabs among anthropologists themselves; the persistence of Zionism even among its so-called critics; and the power of some older white men to deny their own biases and dismiss the analyses of junior female scholars. For us,

these seemingly inconsequential incidents served as crucial reminders and diagnostics. They are reminders of the work that remains to be done, and they are diagnostics of the spaces where academic critique slips into political barrier. These are the moments when our writing is having the impact of making people uncomfortable in politically productive ways. So take a minute to think about that comment you received that did not quite make sense, or the time a reviewer's tone shifted suddenly or a colleague tried to block you in some way. Those are the moments when we might learn something about the broader politics that our writing is shaking up and when our writing might also become sharper in response.