With this issue, American Anthropologist completes its 122th year of publication (if one counts the 11 years [1888–98] during which the journal was published by the Anthropological Society of Washington [AAA 1898]). Although it would be a stretch to assign significance to this number alone (Because it is the most common emergency number in the world? Because it is the side of the smallest square that can be tiled with distinct integer-sided squares?1), the end of another volume of AA does provide an opportunity to reflect on the value of journals, as well as the value of the research article genre, the genre I deal with most extensively in my own editorial work.

THE ROLE OF THE ARTICLE FORM

Although it may seem obvious to state that journals publish articles, it bears emphasizing that the article or essay form enables specific kinds of arguments and conversations.2 Particularly for scholars working from interpretive approaches (and not only in cultural anthropology), the essay “has seemed the natural genre in which to present cultural interpretations and the theories sustaining them” (Geertz 1973:25). The essay form can permit exploratory modes of argumentation, allowing for productive engagements with emergent phenomena (see Fortun 2004).

More generally, the article genre is valuable because it allows for focused yet delimited inquiry. Articles are not books or even novellas; by their very form, they cannot pretend to be comprehensive. The article genre forces researchers to hone in on one piece of a larger project, so as to succinctly show its contribution to specific research, policy, and activist communities. In this sense, the article genre represents a mode of a “partial truth,” one both “committed and incomplete” (Clifford 1986:4), but at the level of epistemology rather than ontology. By compelling researchers to delineate some aspect of their overall work, the article form advances limited yet in-depth modes of analysis that contribute to networks of scholarship in ways that differ both from the more extended analysis of a monograph and the more summary forms of argumentation found in the “research report” or “commentary.”

THE ROLE OF JOURNALS AS SUCH

Although the article genre shapes specific modes of analysis, it is not inevitably the case that journals are the privileged venue in which articles appear. Particularly given the possibilities that now exist for online publishing, the idea that journals control which articles become accessible to broader research communities is not only ethically discomfitting but also technologically naïve. The value of journals in the contemporary moment lies beyond mere gatekeeping or dissemination.

One important rationale for journals involves peer review. Although edited volumes, monographs, and other textual forms can undergo peer review as well, to date journals have provided a more thorough level of scrutiny. Especially if they employ double-blind review, journals assess manuscripts in a different way than edited volumes that either solicit submissions on specific topics or employ (and thus sometimes retreat) preexisting scholarly networks. For any journal (and certainly for a generalist journal like American Anthropologist), editors consider any manuscript in the context of a wide body of submissions over an extended period, permitting a unique analytical context for their assessments. As a result, the feedback journals provide can lead to more polished publications with more convincing claims that speak clearly to relevant literatures.

In addition, while disseminating information in today’s networked world is in theory near effortless, the visibility and regularity of journal production can provide scholars with forms of publicity and legitimacy that might otherwise be difficult to obtain. This is particularly the case for junior scholars as well as scholars outside the normative sites of academic authority (e.g., scholars outside the United States and Europe, scholars in community colleges, and scholars working in nonacademic settings like nonprofit or governmental organizations). The fact that many journals (incl. American Anthropologist) are not yet open access for readers continues to limit this benefit of journals. An economic model that would permit open access for readers (without compromising the current open access for authors by adding subvention fees) would be the ideal solution. Sadly, such a solution shows no sign of materializing in the near future, not least because of a lack of governmental support for scholarly publication.
THE ROLE OF DIFFERING JOURNALS

Although I have cast my discussion broadly, differing journals of course provide different forms of value, shaping characteristics of the articles appearing in them. Journals strongly identified with a discipline may reflect—but also challenge and expand—disciplinary conversations regarding what kinds of topics are most compelling, how an argument is most effectively laid out and advanced, and what kinds of data as well as theoretical argumentation are most convincing. This can particularly be the case for subdisciplinary or otherwise less-generalist journals. For instance, area-focused journals like the Journal of Asian Studies play an important role in building interdisciplinary conversations around geographic regions. With regard to anthropology, topically focused journals like the Journal of Linguistic Anthropology help define topical foci of inquiry and sustain communities of scholarship.

Given my own work with American Anthropologist, I have often thought about the role of “generalist” journals. As I note elsewhere, such journals can be regarded as interdisciplinary journals along the lines of Science or Nature (see Boellstorff 2010). More broadly, I think it crucial to underscore that the goal of a generalist journal is not to define a focus of inquiry as more specialized and subdisciplinary journals typically do. Indeed, my hunch is that confusion over this very issue has been the source of past conflict over AA, because it can foster the idea that the journal seeks to prioritize one subdiscipline or theoretical approach. Instead, I see the purpose of generalist journals as publishing the best research from a range of scholarly communities, without ranking or privileging any one of them.

This understanding of the role of generalist journals has consequences for many of my editorial decisions. For instance, while I do sometimes publish “In Focus” clusters of articles (indeed, a wonderful example of such a cluster appears in this issue), I do not publish such clusters frequently, and I never craft a whole “special issue” focused on a particular topic or subfield. Practical considerations play a role in this decision: those without editorial experience may find it hard to appreciate the degree to which a cluster or special issue disrupts the normal workflow of publication, requiring substantial additional monitoring and editing attention. However, the key reason I avoid clusters and special issues is that it is inadvisable for a single subdiscipline, topic, or collegial network to dominate an entire issue of AA. On occasion large clusters of five or more research articles may be worth the additional effort, but in my view the intellectual contribution of a generalist journal emerges in the juxtaposition of research articles that appear together due to their place in the editorial workflow—that is, because they are ready for publication. The value of a generalist journal does not inhere in every article appealing to every reader but, rather, in every reader finding something appealing, and perhaps from unexpected quarters.

IN THIS ISSUE

With this issue of American Anthropologist, we debut what we hope will be an occasional feature: the “Vital Topics Forum.” This forum features a prompt by a guest editor—in this case, AA Associate Editor for Biological Anthropology Agustín Fuentes. Dr. Fuentes has done a stupendous job of crafting for discussion the topic “On Nature and the Human.” An introductory meditation by Dr. Fuentes is followed by short commentaries from eight eminent anthropologists, concluding with a response from Dr. Fuentes. The goal of this “Vital Topics Forum” is thus to present a full-fledged discussion from several scholars on some issue of contemporary relevance for anthropology, within roughly the length of a single research article.

This issue of American Anthropologist also features an “In Focus” section entitled “(Not) The End of Anthropology, Again? Some Thoughts on Disciplinary Futures.” In their introduction to this section, John Comaroff and Karl-Heinz Kohl discuss how the enduring anxieties over the future of anthropology might be best addressed by moving the debate into a question space—literally, to “reinsert the question mark” and think in a more open-ended manner regarding what lies ahead for anthropological inquiry. Three articles make up this section: Ulf Hannerz’s “Diversity Is Our Business,” Andre Gingrich’s “Transitions: Notes on Sociocultural Anthropology’s Present and Its Transnational Potential,” and John Comaroff’s “The End of Anthropology, Again: On the Future of an In/Discipline.” In various ways, these articles look back into anthropology’s history as well as consider current work to explore both how senses of crisis and irrelevance have emerged as symptomatic of disciplinary insecurity and critique. In doing so, the articles work as well to investigate how notions of culture, diversity, and transnational engagement (at an institutional level, not just in terms of field sites) might reshape what are often fraught discussions regarding anthropological futures.

The other research articles featured in this issue reflect very diverse methods and foci of study, pointing to the broad futures of anthropology itself. In his article “Torture by Cieng: Ethical Theory Meets Social Practice among the Dinka Agaar of South Sudan,” Jeffery L. Deal draws on work in Sudan as both a physician and an anthropologist to trouble notions of human rights and ethics through an ethnographic engagement with violence, justice, and the interplay of local, national, and transnational social actors and cultural logics. Courtney Handman, in her article “Events of Translation: Intertextuality and Christian Ethnotheologies of Change among Gulu-Samane, Papua New Guinea,” explores intersections of translation, religion, and cultural change, paying particular attention to questions of intertextuality and temporality.

In “Cultural Patterns of Trauma among 19th-Century-Born Males in Cadaver Collections,” Carlina de la Cova examines traces of trauma in Euro-American and
African American males between 1825 and 1877, contextualizing this data with historical documentation. The striking differences that emerge regarding forms of trauma provide valuable insight into the forms of sanctioned violence (particularly pugilism) and social conflict during this period of U.S. history. Chiara De Cesari, in her research article “Creative Heritage: Palestinian Heritage NGOs and Defiant Arts of Government,” investigates how nongovernmental organizations engage in “a world-making project of social and institutional production inscribed in a transnational space” as they negotiate contested domains of memory and belonging in the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In “A Child’s House: Social Memory, Identity, and the Construction of Childhood in Early Postclassic Mexican Households,” Kristin De Lucia draws on data from the Early Postclassic site of Xaltocan, Mexico, to argue that archaeological inquiry must pay greater attention to the centrality of children to social life and “the transmission of household identity across generations.”

This issue also features the continuation of our public anthropology reviews alongside a number of book and visual anthropology reviews. Obituaries in this issue commemorate three eminent anthropologists: Melvin Ember, Michael Kearney, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Melvin Ember and Michael Kearney both published work in this journal over many decades (beginning with Ember 1959 and Kearney 1969); to my knowledge, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s publications in this journal are limited to a single book review (Lévi-Strauss 1957), but of course his influence on anthropologists in the United States and beyond cannot be overstated. Taken as a whole, then, this issue of *American Anthropologist* features a range of research articles and other forms of scholarly writing that certainly speak to the value of journals as a genre of intellectual exchange.

**NOTES**

2. For purposes of this discussion, I focus on the articles and essays of the length typically published in *American Anthropologist*.
3. See, for instance, the *AA* “In Focus” cluster on Hurricane Katrina (108.4).

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