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Restrepo, Eduardo.

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Conversations about World Anthropologies

Ten Years Later

EDUARDO RESTREPO
U JAVERIANA, BOGOTÁ-COLOMBIA

Ten years after its birth, we could say that the most outstanding contribution of the World Anthropologies Network (see www.ram-wan.net/html/home.htm) has been its work to produce a collective conceptualization of the way in which visibilization and silencing mechanisms operate both in the transnational field of anthropology and within national anthropological establishments. Within this context, we have given meaning to concepts such as hegemonic anthropologies, subaltern anthropologies, and the world system in anthropology.

This conceptualization has centered on three main aspects: (1) Thinking about anthropologies in the plural rather than in the singular; (2) Focusing on anthropologists' concrete and situated practices rather than on the normative and abstract definition of anthropology; (3) Understanding that the differences between anthropologies is rooted in relations of power that operate at different scales (global, regional, national, local) and in various ways that range from the predominance of certain languages and modes of argumentation to the configuration of particular subjectivities.

Overall, this conceptualization interrupts the essentialist and normative conceptions of anthropology—in the singular—which establishes a diffusionist narrative that erases the bulk of the anthropological work undertaken in peripheral regions (as well as that which is at the margins of the discipline's canon). This conceptualization has resulted from the in-depth analysis of the relationships between existent anthropologies in different parts of the world that has been taking place at least since the 1980s.

It's worth noting that the World Anthropologies Network (WAN) emerged after several years of intense debate among a group of anthropologists located in Europe, the United States, and Latin America. Although a good deal of this debate was done through email, we also held a number of meetings in various places (Argentina, Colombia, the US and Italy) that were of critical importance.

A number of collective and individual publications have been produced, which include an electronic journal and a book edited by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro and Arturo Escobar (*World Anthropologies. Disciplinary transformations within*


systems of power; Berg, 2006). In these publications the authors deal with various aspects of the debate that was born from WAN. Also, it is worth noting that participants of the project offered undergraduate and graduate courses that were based on the project's research at their respective institutions in various parts of the world (some of the syllabi and other published material may be found on the WAN website mentioned above).

From the beginning, the World Anthropologies project sought to create a network that could contribute to the transformation of the terms and conditions of exchange within and among the different anthropologies and anthropologists of the world. The creation of such a network was thought to be more a strategy that embodied a style of intervention in the field of anthropology than as a simple instrument. This is why we defined ourselves as the World Anthropologies Network.

The WAN created a webpage and carried out various joint projects, such as research on the teaching of anthropology in Argentina, Brazil and Colombia, and support to a newly created doctoral program at the University of Cauca, Colombia. Unfortunately, the network has been unable to consolidate and has been practically inactive for some years. For this reason, we must acknowledge that the main objective—to transform the terms and conditions of exchange within and among the world's anthropologies—is far from having been reached. Aside from bringing attention to this problem in a few sectors close to the networks' participants, little has been accomplished in this field.

Given that technological possibilities for communication continue to mushroom, and at the same time, anthropological establishments are becoming ever more provincial, it is imperative to take up this work. More than ever before, we must contribute towards the multiple knowledges of anthropologies and anthropologists across the world.

Eduardo Restrepo is a founding member of the World Anthropologies Network and one of the leading figures of this debate.

Setha Low and Gustavo Lins Ribeiro are contributing editors of World Anthropologies, the AN column of the AAA Committee on World Anthropologies. 

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