



Year in Review 2023

Year in Reviews serve as an end-of-year summary of achievements and activities, as well as an opportunity to outline some future projects the Forum will pursue in the coming year. In this Year in Review, we discuss the rapid expansion of the Forum, a roundtable hosted by the Forum held at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, our ongoing fundraising campaign, and a quick look at our plans for 2024.

Background

The Anthropology Book Forum was founded by the American Anthropological Association as an experimental prototype in digital publishing aimed at accelerating the scholarly book review process through the implementation of a totally digital workflow. At the time of its founding, the majority of reviews were published several years after the books they assessed had been released, in many cases, the lag was upwards of five years. Additionally, book reviews were appearing in print journals or hidden behind paywalls, limiting their impact and the readership who could access them. In this vein, the Forum was conceived of as a space that would actively work to reduce barriers to information and engagement, through an entirely Open Access platform with a streamlined digital workflow that focused exclusively on reviews and discussions of newly published work.

Based on the idea that book reviews are not just summaries of academic texts, but engagements with scholarship, ideas and authors, the purpose of the Forum is thus to facilitate connections and exchange between authors and readers within and outside of anthropology. What began as a publishing experiment has grown exponentially over the years, with increasing participation from both readers and reviewers. As an open access journal, committed to a set of principles that aims to reduce barriers to accessibility, the Forum publishes reviews of newly published work in multiple formats every Monday, 52 weeks a year.



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Last year, the Anthropology Book Forum was awarded the General Anthropology Division [New Directions Award](#) (group category) for its “vision, commitment, and broad impact that diverse and accessible formats of anthropological knowledge offer multiple readerships within and outside the academy.” In recent years, the Forum has sought to encourage and host new configurations of the book review, including visual, audio, and video formats that can reach a broader public both within and outside of academia. We continue to experiment based on constant feedback from our authors and readers.

Looking Back: Achievements of 2023

This past year has been another year of tremendous growth for the Forum. We have seen engagement increase significantly, from social media following, downloads and online reads of reviews, as well as the number of reviews submitted. Working with over 100 publishers around the world, we continuously seek to make available a broad range of texts relevant to anthropological audiences, broadly conceived. The forum currently has an online readership of around 4,000 per month, and a contributor base of 2500 and growing, along with a strong social media following. From last year alone, our online readership has grown over 30%, and journal registration has doubled. The Anthropology Book Forum has gained more than 3500 followers on Facebook, with posts having a reach of between 36,000 and 49,000 Facebook users (roughly a threefold increase from last year). We published 50 reviews during 2023, and each review published had a minimum of 50 downloads (not including online reads). The most-read review of all time remains Rebecka Rehnström’s [review](#) of *There's a Disco Ball Between Us* by Jafari S. Allen, with well over 1,000 downloads and reads in the last year alone.

This dynamic growth of the Forum has come at a time when many academic journals are slowly trying to reduce or altogether remove book reviews for economic reasons, given that this form of writing tends to lower impact factors and does not produce revenue. The rapid expansion of the Anthropology Book Forum over the last several years, however, suggests that it is filling a need despite the perception that book reviews do not contribute anything of value to the discipline.



Image: Our Facebook posts have a reach of between 38,000-49,000 Facebook users each week.

“The Book Review in Transition”: ABF Roundtable at the AAA Annual Meeting

This year the Forum held a roundtable at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting to think through the value of book reviews and spaces like the Anthropology Book Forum to the discipline, along with the political economy of writing, critiquing and publishing. This roundtable aimed to host a conversation around the book review in a time of transition and its role in contemporary scholarly exchange, particularly given that book reviews are not perceived to add value or metrics for journals. Toward this end, this roundtable brought together authors who engaged with reviews of their recently published work to reflect on the value of the book review, the role reviews play in reaching larger audiences, and what an author can learn about their work by engaging with reviews. The panel similarly engaged with the ways in which different modes of review can provide a medium for early career scholars and graduate students to engage with disciplinary conversations, while also thinking about the value of reviews for larger audiences beyond anthropology. Participants included Gustavo Barbosa (Associate Researcher, Center of Middle Eastern Studies, Universidade Federal Fluminense), Susan Wright (Professor of Educational Anthropology, Aarhus University), Juan M. del Nido (Postdoctoral Research Associate, University of Cambridge), Matilde Córdoba Azcáratem (Associate Professor, Communication, University of California San Diego), Nomi Stone (Assistant Professor, Literature and Creative Writing, The University of Texas at Dallas), and was moderated by the Forum’s editors, Rasmus Rodineliussen (Stockholm University) and Emilia Group (Stanford University).



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We've included a summary here of the key ideas and topics that emerged, and the full panel will also be available online with all other virtual panels on the AAA website.

The Political Economy of the Book Review

A key topic that emerged during this panel was the political economy of the book review, including the role of book reviews in career trajectories, the value of reviews as academic capital, how labor is distributed in producing book reviews, which books are reviewed, where book reviews are published, and the relationship between publishers and authors. In this sense, the conversation covered the larger context and politics of knowledge production within which the book review is situated.

Panelists pointed out the role that the book review plays in career development, especially for early career faculty and scholars. For instance, in some universities, whether your work has been reviewed in journals and how many times it has been reviewed counts towards tenure petitions or in annual reviews. Reviews published soon after the publication of the book also serve as a form of academic capital for authors to submit with their portfolios for job applications or tenure. Book reviews published in larger journals is also one way for those outside of anglophone centers to increase engagement with their work. It is also helpful for those publishers who do not have the kinds of resources as large publishing houses to advertise as extensively. At the same time, there tends to be a dearth of early career scholars writing book reviews, with most reviews authored by either tenured professors or advanced PhD students. This has a lot to do with the fact that early career scholars tend to shoulder significant teaching and administration roles, and cannot enjoy the same level of academic engagement as their colleagues.

In short, panelists argued that reviews matter, for determining engagement, professional advancement, book sales, future book projects, grant and funding applications, and public perceptions of anthropological research.

The Ethics of Writing Book Reviews



Leading from the political economy of the book review, participants reiterated that there is an ethically responsible way to produce a review. Book reviews are, for some, the first encounter with an author's work, especially given the fact that reviews in the Forum are open access while not all books are immediately accessible, and they inevitably impact the author's career. As such, there is a responsibility to prioritize a fair representation of the core arguments, a balanced evaluation, as well as a recognition of the larger project from which the book emerged. Engaging in respectful collegiality, a good review aims to acknowledge the author's efforts, even in the face of disagreements, understanding that a book often represents years of labor and critical engagement with a series of questions and field experience. In this vein, the overarching goal of a review is not only to express critique alone but to offer a thoughtful and considerate analysis of the broader themes and literary merits of the work.

This is not always an easy task to take on; it involves an exercise in trying to understand complex arguments and conveying them succinctly within the constraints of a short review. Thus, rather than focusing on what a book could or should be according to the reviewer's preferences, ethical reviews concentrate on the project as it stands, recognizing the culmination of the author's extensive labor and the book as it is. Some panelists noted instances of reviews written with little consideration for the larger projects and labor already contributed, cautionary examples that emphasize the need for a conscientious approach to reviewing. Ethical book reviews, in essence, serve as a guide for readers and a means to appreciate and critically engage with an author's work without diminishing its merit.

The Pedagogical Value of the Book Review

Panelists noted that the pedagogical value of writing book reviews extends beyond the act of critiquing literature; it serves as a valuable educational tool for honing critical thinking, analytical skills, and effective communication. Crafting a book review requires students to engage deeply with the material, identifying key themes, evaluating the author's argument, and articulating their thoughts coherently. This process not only enhances their comprehension of the subject matter but also cultivates the ability to express ideas persuasively. Additionally, students learn to navigate



the delicate balance between subjective opinions and objective analysis, fostering a nuanced understanding of literature. Moreover, the exercise encourages students to consider the broader cultural and societal implications of the work, promoting a holistic approach to critical evaluation. In essence, the pedagogical value of the book review lies in its capacity to empower students with essential skills that transcend the realm of literature, preparing them for academic and professional challenges requiring thoughtful analysis and effective communication.

Reaching Larger Audiences

Book reviews serve as a vital link between academia and broader audiences. Open access reviews effectively bridge geographical and resource-related gaps, ensuring that valuable scholarly contributions reach a global audience. In this vein, reviews play a multifaceted role in breaking down barriers, making academic discourse more accessible, and extending the reach of scholarly insights beyond traditional academic circles. This is evidenced by the fact that some publishers are now including a final chapter which takes the form of a traditional book review. This final chapter condenses the argument of the book for wider audiences, and effectively conveys the key ideas for those who may not be familiar with theoretical or methodological arguments, but who would be interested in the central claims of the volume.

New Formats

Panelists also discussed the value of experimenting with new kinds of formats and different modes of engagement as a form of book review. The ABF has already introduced several different options for engaging with newly published work, including [Author Book Talks](#) and [Author Interviews](#), other-than-English reviews, book review essays, [Conversations](#) and Trajectories (see our [Focus and Scope](#)). Panelists emphasized the value of a more engaged conversation between reviewer and author, potentially expanding current options to include the possibility of an author response. This would involve either a short reply from the author to the review, or a more interview-style format where the author can respond to provocations from the reviewer. This kind of response would contribute to a more dynamic exchange of ideas, and would further enrich the conversation. For instance, the American Association of Geographers currently offers a session modality called



“Author Meets Critic,” which could be a useful addition to the AAA Annual Meeting panel choices. In this format, organizers put together a larger panel of those interested in the topic of a recently published book, and discuss its merits alongside the author. Additionally, it would also make sense to engage more roundtable discussions between authors, policy makers (or even larger audiences such as activists or practitioners), to expand dialogue.

The accessibility of book reviews makes them widely engaging, and podcasts, as a medium, are another useful format for conveying information and facilitating discussions. While book review essays might offer in-depth analyses of themes and arguments, podcast reviews present opportunities for a greater engagement with the author. Interviews in the form of book reviews create openings for dynamic conversations, and extended forums on a single book or on several books invoking similar themes or topics could foster dialogue across diverse areas and between a range of participants.

Another idea focused on conversations, either in written, video or audio form, that are produced at a specific fieldsite or through fieldwork experiences. For instance, an author and reviewer could meet in a place outside the academy to engage in a specific fieldsite. Such a change in setting could add an immersive element, prompting thoughtful inquiries and eliciting different kinds of questions. In this vein, panelists also encouraged a playful engagement with different forms of interaction, and allowing creativity that enriches scholarly experiences. A variety of formats, from interviews to book forums to audio and visual modes, not only enhances accessibility but also contributes to a dynamic and enjoyable scholarly discourse. At the same time, panelists reiterated the value of the traditional book review, one that captures and critically engages in the core argument of the book in accessible language.

Finally, panelists noted that coverage of books written in languages other than English, or books in English reviewed in other languages, could be increased. The editors have worked on this aspect for a few years now, but with very low responses from reviewers. We hope coverage of other than



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English books can pick up some traction during 2024—if you are interested in doing such a review, please get in touch!

Looking forward: 2024

2024 marks the start of the 10th issue of the Anthropology Book Forum and we look forward to seeing what our next decade has to offer. This coming year, we will also embark on a project to republish around 3000 reviews from the Anthropology Review Database, which was the predecessor of the Forum. With this addition, the Forum will become the largest database of book reviews in the world.

To expedite this process, and to increase the work we at the Forum can do, we have launched [a fundraising campaign](#). Currently, the Forum is run entirely on volunteer labor, and in order to continue to provide a service to the discipline, we are in need of your support. The Anthropology Book Forum does not charge fees for publishing or for accessing content, and has some of the fastest publishing timelines of all social science journals. Over the last few years, our community and our ambition to support it are growing faster than what we can accommodate through volunteering alone. If you enjoy the work the ABF does, consider donating. All donations will go directly to the ABF in support of our existing programs and the development of new ones!

Your support:

- Ensures that we can pursue important activities that may not produce revenue, but which *matter* for our discipline.
- Helps the Forum provide diverse and accessible formats of anthropological knowledge entirely open access and free of charge.
- Helps advance the Forum's growth as a resource for academics, students, and the broader public.
- Ensures that diverse voices can find an accessible outlet for sharing ideas and critique.

As always, we hope that you will be interested in working with us to make the Forum increasingly interactive, up-to-date, and accessible to readership within and beyond the discipline.



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