

Foreword

Anthropological writing regularly takes certain forms: monographs, journal articles, edited volumes, and book chapters. The fact that encyclopedia entries are not a common genre of expression presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the editors of this work. The challenge is that we are asking contributors to adhere to a format that is often new to them, and to provide reflections on anthropology that do not rely on lengthy ethnographic description or analysis. The opportunity looks remarkably similar: the fact that we are requesting authors to consider their field or subfield in novel ways; to deploy forms of address and to imagine readerships that may go beyond the familiar and the known.

We hope that writing for this encyclopedia represents an excellent opportunity for anybody who is convinced of the worth of promoting anthropology both within and beyond the academy; we trust even more that this publication will open up new worlds of knowledge for its readers, whether they are anthropological “novices” keen to explore a new discipline or experienced researchers interested in broadening their understanding of a discipline that is expanding and fragmenting all the time. While any encyclopedia tends to give a somewhat adamant and immutable impression—produced by the authoritative tone of the entries and the sheer size of the total production—we emphasize that ours is a dynamic and evolving text, with entries being added each year. In augmenting the text over time, we rely heavily on the judgments of our associate editors, who represent complementary areas of expertise. The new pieces we receive also provide an excellent indication of what anthropologists from around the world consider to be the most important dimensions of the field, and therefore they inform us as we commission further entries and cover more subfields.

Encyclopedias can be read and used in many ways. Most obviously, they provide a quick summary of a topic and point to some related subjects. More subversively—especially when consulted in physical rather than electronic form—they offer intriguing thematic adjacencies for any reader who can dwell for a few more moments: after all, the person who looks up “authenticity” might also decide they wish to learn about “autobiography.” In a self-consciously “international” encyclopedia, such subversion can also work by indicating that anthropologies in Austria or Australia have their own histories and concerns, constituting local landscapes of debate that have not yet been globalized or homogenized. An encyclopedia is not an ethnography, but nor is it a dictionary. Its entries are meant to provoke as well as to inform, and perhaps to suggest new ways in which the discipline might be imagined.

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