

SOCIAL THOUGHT & COMMENTARY

# Ebola at a Distance: A Pathographic Account of Anthropology's Relevance

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ABSTRACT

*Drawing on a year of researching and writing about the West African Ebola epidemic from afar, I use the heuristic of virality to critically examine the collective US anthropology response to Ebola, a viral disease, and the anthropological knowledge networks formed to address the 2013–2015 outbreak. Specifically, I describe how digital media facilitated an entry point to build connections and knowledge around the epidemic in American anthropologists' quest to prove the discipline's relevance, the viral circulations of and replications of anthropological ideas in the Ebola response, and the attempts to shed pathogenic racial legacies of Africanist anthropology shaping US anthropology's official response. [Keywords: Ebola, marginalization, racism, inequality, relevance, history of anthropology.]*

## Exposures

On the morning of November 6, 2014, I sat listening to opening remarks that were being given for an emergency meeting convened in Washington, DC.<sup>1</sup> The meeting's organizers claimed as its overarching aim: "to provide actionable guidance to real-time actors in the field and to the policy community that takes into account the interrelated technical, political, social, cultural, and economic dimensions and effects of the current Ebola crisis" (email, October 11, 2014). The two-dozen scholars addressed that morning had been brought together, the speaker noted, to make anthropological insights "relevant" to decision-makers involved in the Ebola response. Responding to the comments, a colleague leaned in conspiratorially and murmured in my ear, "We're already relevant."

Then I paused to mull over his statement: *Were* we already relevant? This question, in my mind, haunted collective (and often "distant") anthropological responses to Ebola on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>2</sup> The question animated our debates in the room and in online forums where "Ebola anthropology" was discussed (Leclerc-Madlala 2014, Faye 2014). Did the fine-grained description and deep, local knowledge that anthropologists championed, translate into something that aid workers—clinicians, epidemiologists, lab technicians, and community education and outreach workers—would find relevant? Precisely what form does relevant information take? What social and political processes allow for relevance to be packaged and delivered through the appropriate channels? Faced with a crisis, anthropologists in the room were compelled to see Relevance as an actually existing thing to pursue—highly context specific, institutionally mediated, and important to everyone—but readily and easily defined by no one. To paraphrase Nick Seaver—and Marilyn Strathern before him—the nice thing about relevance is that everyone wants to embody it (Seaver 2015, Strathern 1995).

Relevance is a relational phenomenon, in that it refers to the extent and quality of a *connection* to a particular issue of significance. In this case, significant issues were interventions to lower Ebola incidence, reduce mortality from Ebola, and so on. Perhaps more crucial than—but deeply intertwined with—concerns about relevance, are notions of distance. Distance is itself a measure of connection. Of interest to me in this paper are four forms of distance implicated in how anthropologists communicate relevance to each other and to others: physical, disciplinary, interpretive, and agentive. This especially applies to anthropologists who gathered to

make recommendations but may not have been directly involved in efforts to combat Ebola on the ground.

In this essay, which draws on 18 months of face-to-face and virtual engagement with virologists, clinicians, epidemiologists, program managers, and social scientists involved in the Ebola response (July 2014 – Dec 2015), I discuss the social production of “relevant” anthropological knowledge and its relationship to these four forms of distance. In particular, I analyze public writing by anthropologists and the November 6, 2014 meeting (“the emergency meeting”), alongside conversations with participants and observers, as *diagnostic events*. Such events “reveal ongoing contests and conflicts and competitions and the efforts to prevent, suppress, or repress these” (Moore 1987:730). Commentary on social media and by participant-observers of these events, as Sally Falk Moore argued, offers a “history of the present”—an ethnographic account of local and large-scale processes unfolding in relation to anthropology’s Ebola response.

I am also intellectually invested in examining how social media may constitute one or more of the many field sites where anthropologists made sense of the outbreak and responses to it. #Ebola, for example, was a social field where anthropological and other forms of knowledge were produced, circulated, and contested. Organizations like the American Anthropological Association (AAA), the World Health Organization (WHO) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) endorsed various forms of knowledge in this social field, often shifting their official messages as individuals and communities—from pundits and experts to laypersons—responded to the information circulating about Ebola. Analyses of these forms of sociality also help explain the historical and political contexts in which such circulations are made possible.

I argue three points. First, when anthropologists emphasize the discipline’s relevance, they draw on and reinforce a widely shared sense that anthropological insights have been ignored—relegated to the margins of public conversations. This is particularly acute in times of crisis, where “saving lives” takes a backseat to critical reflection and slow research. Attempts to be relevant in such cases may require prioritizing the demands of crisis over other anthropological protocol related to proximity, intimacy, and critique. I argue that, rather than being ignored, anthropology was widely perceived to be predictably suited for official Ebola responses because of the location of the outbreak (West Africa), modes of transmission (interpersonal intimate contact and zoonosis) and popular frames for describing

local responses to the disease and efforts to combat it (e.g. culture as barrier to seeking health care or heeding public health messages).

Second, anthropologists' desire to communicate the discipline's relevance, irrespective of the topic, has led to a particular vision, but by no means the only vision, in which relevance is *virally* produced for a vaguely defined group of "real-time actors" *over there* (Davis 2015). This quest for relevance through amplification and circulability of key messages—here, glossed as *virality*—is not unique to anthropology. Fighting the ongoing "assault" on the liberal arts in our universities, social science and humanities disciplines have adopted open access and digital platforms to pursue relevance through viral means (Schneider 2012). A commitment to cultivating relevance through these platforms inflects how the Ebola response was organized among anthropologists working in the three outbreak countries and abroad.

Third, in pursuit of relevance, semi-permeable membranes form around "Ebola" that resemble, map onto, and amplify pre-existing rifts (or "distances") forged within anthropology: between it and other disciplines, and vis-à-vis the "objects" through which it seeks its relevance. Membranes circumscribing anthropologists' "ownership" claims of regional or subfield expertise become ephemeral and "leaky" during crises and by involvement of actors positioned as outsiders-within—many of whom gain access through social media platforms like blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. The "leakiness" of these membranes and the critiques seeping in through them call attention to the terms under which certain groups have been marginalized from important conversations about anthropology's relevance. Marginalization has occurred along racial, national, and institutional lines.

### **Entry Points: A Brief Discussion on the Relationship Between Relevance and Distance**

*Were we already relevant?* The answer depends on how one sees anthropology's role in times of crisis, and how/where one is located within institutions when crisis strikes. Anthropology as a discipline represents itself in terms that place high value on intimacy, locality and "fine grain." Embodying these virtues in ways that ensure anthropology's relevance to *itself* often entails bridging or navigating physical and interpretive forms of distance. In other words, to be relevant to scholars in our discipline, anthropologists usually identify, travel to and live in a field site for an extended

period of time. Among anthropologists who worked in the Ebola-affected region and were able to travel, little was more vexing than physical distance from the field. While some of us had recently been to the Ebola-affected countries, or indeed, were planning visits in the near future, the situation on the ground was so severe and rapidly changing, that even those of us with an inside scoop on the Ebola response, could not fully interpret all that we heard in accounts from friends, media sources, or through official channels. Academic institutions where many anthropologists were based, moreover, had restricted travel to the region after half a dozen Ebola cases in the US caused mass hysteria (Pérez-Peña 2014, Roos 2014). In this context of restricted travel for some anthropologists, “having been there” had to suffice for making relevant commentary about the Ebola crisis.

While many anthropologists were conflicted about what they could say about Ebola-related events from afar (and for issues with which they have little experience, like epidemics and public health, for example), they have been generally more comfortable navigating the interpretive distance that characterizes their normal work. In essence, an ethnographer is expected to travel to a field site, conduct systematic observation, participate in everyday activities of the community under study and document them in field notes. Field notes are annotations of social life; they chronicle as much as they perform a first-line analytical function for making sense of the fieldworker’s experience (Sanjek 1990; Jackson 1990; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). Like many forms of scientific knowledge production, ethnographic fieldwork often entails or relies upon a bifurcation between “the field” and “the office”—a place where mountains of information are consolidated, organized, analyzed, and interpreted (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Sangaramoorthy and Benton 2012).<sup>3</sup> Some of these organizational and interpretive activities can be coterminous with field-based research, but anthropologists are to some degree expected to withdraw from the field to do the bulk of their writing, thinking, presenting, and publishing. We return to the field to build and maintain contacts and nurture relationships developed during previous fieldwork.

None of this is novel to any reasonably trained socio-cultural anthropologist. Yet it is worth thinking about how we mobilize and use physical and interpretive “distance” productively under certain circumstances but are more ambivalent about what we know and how we know it, as it relates to our presence in or absence from the field.<sup>4</sup> The virtues of intimacy and fine-grained description and analysis also shape the sense that

anthropology is marginal within social science and within public conversations (Ingold 2008, Lindstrom and Stromberg 1999). So when a select group of anthropologists who claim expertise of the region and in the fields of public health and medicine were invited to participate in this emergency meeting, many relished the opportunity to help stave off crisis in a culturally appropriate way, informed, too, by their knowledge of local socialities, political economy, and history.

Upholding anthropological virtues in service of goals relevant to “real-time actors” referenced in the emergency meeting invitation, therefore, entails negotiating agentive distance. This is the presumed divide between “thinkers” and “doers” that inflects much of humanitarian response, and that reflects the long-standing (and somewhat false) tension between applied and academic anthropology (Fassin 2013, Vaughan 2005, Besteman and Haugerud 2013, cf. Ingold 2014). Ebola offered distant anthropologists (“thinkers”) the opportunity to prove their relevance—to assert a connection between their intellectual insights and events unfolding in West Africa—to a vaguely defined group of “real-time actors” (“doers”) in the field. Anthropological engagement in a time of crisis required navigating and shortening the metaphorical distance between thinking and doing, between critique and application.

Rather than being marginal, however, anthropologists were among early responders in Guinea (Poon 2014, Doctors with Borders 2014, Jasarevic 2014). Despite this involvement, once the outbreak had spread beyond Guinea, many reports on the outbreak in English-language media read like *juju* journalism. Such journalism portrays “culture” in terms of radical difference—exotic cultural practices and a tradition-modernity divide that threatened civilization itself (Shaw 2003, cf. French 2012). Many anthropologists were eager to demystify cultural practices and problematize *juju* journalism by placing the epidemic in its broader context, as the email invitation for the emergency meeting suggested. Like many others, I had been drawn into the US media frenzy around Ebola. I was asked to explain local recalcitrance and mistrust of “Western medicine,” bush meat consumption, and “traditional” burial practices to Twitter followers, journalists, and aid worker friends who were heading off to West Africa (Zepps and Beyerstein 2014, Democracy Now! 2014, The Takeaway 2014).

For some agencies working on the front lines, medical anthropologists were uniquely suited to identifying cultural barriers to compliance with public health orders. When Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) published a

link to their manual for new Ebola fieldworkers on Twitter, for example, it included a section of slides focusing specifically on culture and medical anthropology. The section primarily emphasized how culture was a barrier to containment and treatment regimens.<sup>5</sup> However anthropologists were enlisted to assist in the outbreak, they were often asked to provide “cultural keys” to help unlock mysterious preventing full penetration of humanitarian aid into communities (Moran-Thomas 2013, Fassin 2011:40). Such “slotting” of anthropological expertise into public health practice recalls Trouillot’s (2003:28) famous statement: “Anthropology did not create the Savage, rather, the Savage was the *raison d’être* of anthropology.”

Put another way, we were already relevant, but perhaps not the way we wanted to be. Anthropologists generally wanted to control and minimize “culturalizing” narratives, infusing what they thought was the missing context in media and NGO reporting on the epidemic. Anthropological “think pieces” were the digital expressions of these desires, with digital editors’ sights set on generating relevant material for anthropologists and general audiences—measured implicitly by this material’s potential to *go viral*.

## **Replication: Listicles, Memos and Tweets as Agents of Virality**

### ***Going viral: listicles FTW*<sup>6</sup>**

In August 2014, the website *Somatosphere* started an Ebola Fieldnotes series, in which medical anthropologists wrote short blog essays commenting on aspects of the Ebola epidemic from various field sites and perspectives. Similarly, *Cultural Anthropology*’s Hot Spots series, which regularly provided anthropologists an opportunity to weigh in on current events, featured a segment on Ebola (Moran and Hoffman 2014). Essays in these venues have been useful for reaching anthropologists and non-specialists wanting “hot takes” on the epidemic that place it in social, historical, and political context (Lakoff, Collier, and Kelty 2015). Such platforms have also been the launching pad for more action-oriented approaches to anthropology’s involvement in the Ebola response.

An example of an action-oriented blog post was “Ten Things Anthropologists Can Do To Fight the West African Ebola Epidemic,” published in late September 2014 (Abramowitz 2014). As the title suggests, it was a listicle—a portmanteau of “list” and “article”—a form popularized by viral

websites like *Buzzfeed* and increasingly common form of digital content for US national newspapers like the *Washington Post* (Birthisel 2014, Benton and Dionne 2015). Within hours of its posting, a couple dozen friends and colleagues had circulated links to the listicle via Twitter, Facebook, texts and e-mail. In it, Abramowitz describes the horror of being one of many anthropologists who have “woken up mid-career” to “[find] the countries where they’ve lived and worked awash in mass deaths.” Anthropologists, despite their deep knowledge of Ebola-affected countries, she argued, had received far too few invitations to be involved in the response. To support her claim that anthropological expertise remained “untapped,” the author describes a situation in which she placed a phone call to the New York headquarters of Doctors without Borders to offer her services. During the call, she was told that the organization rarely hires medical anthropologists. This ethnographic vignette, written in the form of a transcript— itself a kind of list—introduces a ten-item list of specific tasks that anthropologists could perform as a part of an Ebola relief effort.

The following is an abridged version of the published listicle (shortened for the sake of space and clarity), which contained specific examples and some citations:

Anthropologists can:

1. Teach epidemiologists how to count the dead in West Africa.
2. Systematically observe, report on, interpret, and explain local perspectives on the Ebola epidemic response.
3. Detect emerging health risks in the “noise” around Ebola.
4. Identify local health capabilities and latent social structural capacities for emergent Ebola responses.
5. Convene university-based multi-disciplinary study groups that include undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty to track the epidemic in real time, focusing on the sociological, economic, political, and cultural aspects of the outbreak.
6. Share their networks of local contacts with global health experts who are trying to coordinate a response.
7. Provide training, coordination, and qualitative data analysis to support local Liberian, Sierra Leonean, and Guinean teams who try to use local information to design effective interventions.
8. Take the lead in generating innovative solutions to the global health community’s mass health communication challenges.

9. Through the leadership of the American Anthropological Association, the European Association of Social Anthropologists, or the World Council of Anthropological Associations, advocate more strenuously for a “seat at the table” for the social sciences to contribute to the Ebola effort.
10. Increase pressure on Congress to provide funding for NSF RAPID Research Grants for Ebola research, and for all other basic social science research that seeks to engage with real-time emergencies.

The listicle, which garnered 29 comments (most were “pingbacks,” which are not comments at all but “references”), provoked both enthusiastic praise and weary skepticism, making it another useful diagnostic event for thinking through larger questions linking relevance and virality. One anthropologist colleague, who had spent years working in Sierra Leone, told me that the list “got her fired up” and had her thinking that she could actually *do* something to help. Anthropologists who were intimately familiar with outbreak investigations were skeptical of claims about anthropology’s marginalization (see comments by Thurka Sangaramoorthy, Johanna Crane, and Theresa MacPhail). While anthropologists were rarely first responders to outbreak investigations, they argued, they were increasingly invited to assist on outbreak investigation teams. Other commenters on *Somatosphere* point out that the listicle seemed inattentive to already existing efforts; moreover, it was not clear that many of the tasks outlined there required anthropological expertise, or specifically, whether they required *our outside intervention* to bring an end to Ebola (see comments by Felix Riedel and Anne).

The listicle was posted on a website largely visited by anthropologists, but it seemed that its presumed audience went beyond this group to include people and institutions that had not considered how anthropology could be relevant (which did not necessarily exclude us anthropologists). The listicle therefore performs two functions in pursuit of relevance. First, it emboldens anthropologists and anthropological claims of relevance by using the conventions of name-checking and citation that valorizes our expertise in the field.<sup>7</sup> This builds solidarity and confidence that anthropologists can do something useful now and have done important things in the past. Indeed, a couple of commenters on the listicle expressed gratitude that a clearly delineated list of anthropological tasks had been published—publicized—for anyone who performed the appropriate keyword

search (see comment by Amy Santee). In short, it communicated to all who bothered to scan the list that *we were already relevant*. We have been connected to tasks that matter and have made a difference.

The second function of the listicle is that it presumes and prefigures a certain kind of audience—non-anthropologists and skeptical anthropologists—and how they process information. Most of the posts on *Somatosphere*, including those posted as part of the Ebola Fieldnotes series, are very short essays (800–1500 words). This post was distinguished from other blog posts on the website in that its content was organized into a numbered list. The distinctive quality of the list is that it organizes and orders the social world of anthropological intervention; it imposes order on ethnographic practices and anthropological theorizing, which are typically portrayed as a fragmented, (overly) nuanced, and subjective. “Lists may not lead us to a deeper understanding of the world,” writes linguist Arika Okrent (2014), “but they give us the reassuring sense that understanding is at least possible.”

The “reassuring sense” that the list engenders is also what enhances its potential to be shared widely within social and professional networks and to spark discussion and debate. This is significant as the international institutions involved in the Ebola intervention were not simply present in the field, but also active on social media platforms.<sup>8</sup> Judging from the number of comments, pingbacks, and Twitter and Facebook shares it received, the listicle was circulated more widely than any of the other blog posts in *Somatosphere*'s Ebola Fieldnotes series. It also provoked more debate than any of the others, suggesting that the format itself, in addition to its content, made it more “shareable” and easily digested and therefore, more relevant.<sup>9</sup>

Metrics of virality identified elsewhere, expressed in terms of “shares,” “likes,” “pingbacks,” media appearances and page views, circumscribed how we communicated anthropology's relevance to audiences that had not yet taken its role in outbreak response for granted. The freedom of circulation and recombination that virality implies was counterbalanced by the order imposed by lists like these. Put differently, to deviate from the order imposed by “the list” was also to permit the infiltration of irrelevant anthropological details into the Ebola response. In other words, despite the indeterminacy of the phrase “can do,” such lists give the impression that the items on the list are *the extent* of what is possible. Experts on the ground I talked with via email about the list, for example, worried that it

offered no new insights and would therefore marginalize the work of anthropologists if these “ten things” *were all we could do*.

The listicle is not the only kind of list shaping “what anthropologists can do.” Various lists dictate the role of anthropologists in the official Ebola response. NGO and UN terms of reference (TOR) for anthropologists, one WHO-affiliated anthropologist complained, asked them to perform so many tasks that they could not be achieved during a short-term contract. Such complaints call attention to the challenges of working with inflexible bureaucracies during emergencies. It also opened up the possibility of turning the anthropological gaze to the cultural and social practices of humanitarian health organizations—something actively discouraged by organizations, according to a UN anthropologist, because of the exceptional nature of the crisis. Other kinds of lists—notably, the memos, white papers, and briefs resulting from the emergency meeting described in the next section—compelled anthropologists to determine which of their recommendations would be “actionable” by a vaguely defined group of actors involved in the Ebola response.

### ***Actionability without Actors: Memos, White Papers, Briefs***

Preparation and engagement is crucial for the success of this Task Force’s agenda. Therefore, invited participants will be required to prepare and pre-circulate two documents by October 21st: (1) a two-page brief proposing specific actionable interventions for the current Ebola crisis for peer review during the workshop, and (2) a one-page statement in which you consider how you can draw upon your own expertise to critically address both the immediate and longer-term aspects of the crisis.<sup>10</sup>

In this paragraph excerpted from the invitation for the emergency meeting, here called a “task force,” participants were expected to submit, circulate and ultimately peer-review “actionable” recommendations for institutions involved in addressing the Ebola crisis. When I submitted questions to the organizers listed in the email asking what specific needs NGOs had expressed, I at first received no answer. One of the meeting’s organizers later explained that they had arranged a meeting with NGOs working in the region. During the meeting, organizers mentioned meeting with NGOs, but

little information was provided—even after explicit questioning by meeting attendees. Additional critical questions left unaddressed in the lead-up to the meeting, and the topic of this section, were: Whose action was deemed necessary to reduce Ebola transmission and mortality? Among those necessary actors, whose actions would we be trying to influence? Whose action would be buttressed by our “expertise?”

This set of questions indexes a deeper concern about how “actionability” functions in relation to agentive distance and relevance. The divide between thinkers and doers animates this directive to academic anthropologists. This framing suggests that academic anthropologists are adept at crafting critiques of humanitarian interventions but do not offer practical solutions for the problems they identify. Indeed, two weeks after the emergency meeting, an MSF anthropologist at the 2014 AAA meetings exclaimed during an Ebola roundtable, “We have too many critiques of humanitarianism!” She went on to explain that while such critiques were needed, anthropologists also needed to roll up their sleeves and help. In the same discussion, a WHO anthropologist highlighted how she resolved a conflict over burials in a Guinean village. We were reminded, again, that our relevance was intimately connected to our ability to act—or at the very least—provide actionable recommendations.

If the email’s authors had not specified what made a recommendation actionable, the emergency meeting facilitators clarified it for us. As we developed our talking points for a final public presentation, we were advised to keep “critique off the table.” That we needed to be reminded to do so indicated that facilitators were not convinced that everyone in the room agreed with such a project. Indeed, a few people expressed ambivalence about these instructions outside the meetings, or did so in small group work before being brought “on task.” Being brought on task and small resistances to this demand reflected a general tension between critique and crisis that dominated discussions around that time. One colleague, upon reviewing this essay, says that despite her concerns about the meeting, she “went along because of the sense of crisis.”

Many of us did. Our desire to make recommendations actionable was shaped by the crisis. It influenced how we communicated anthropological contributions. At the request of meeting organizers, we circulated anthropological knowledge in the form of briefs, press conferences, memos, and white papers. The briefs solicited from invited participants in the weeks preceding the meeting would be circulated amongst ourselves, according

to the emails. The insights compiled during the meeting would be shared in a public presentation to NGO employees, university-area communities, and journalists. Ultimately, the notes collected by student note-takers would be condensed—to use the communications specialist’s words—into a “glossy” white paper printed and distributed with the AAA logo.

During a conference call with an anthropologist based in Accra with the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) (some 1,500 kilometers from the outbreak’s epicenter, representing another form of distance deployed in humanitarian response), we learned that our insights, along with those gathered in the field, were to be packaged into memos. These memos would be circulated to NGO-based service providers. A couple of field-based anthropologists I talked to in summer 2015 were annoyed by requests for their data from distant observers, given the already extraordinary demands on their time. During in-person conversations with individuals who worked as anthropologists and health workers in Sierra Leone and Liberia, I heard generally negative impressions about the usefulness of these memos, but I cannot say with any certainty what their overall impact (or relevance) was. From my experience working in emergency and other settings, however, artifacts like these are helpfully performative, lending materiality to otherwise imperceptible involvement (Hull 2012).

By requesting actionability without specific actors, the authors of the email center anthropologists, positioning them as the architects of their own relevance. Tasked with providing actionable recommendations for review by other anthropologists and eventual distribution to absent others, the anthropologist is constrained by a template of relevance that may serve to further validate anthropology’s marginalization. A template of relevance that privileges actionability without actors undermines some of the *connections* that relevance implies—and that anthropologists and other social scientists, are well suited to analyze. In each of my questions about actionable recommendations in the beginning of this section, “whose action” is the (grammatical) object of our attempts to be relevant. In those questions, we were the only *acting* subjects in our quest for relevance. “Anne” describes this disconnect in her comment on the listicle blog post, framing her critique in terms of an academic/applied divide:

The main problem right now, it seems to me, is not that academic anthropologists aren’t being listened to. Its [sic] that academic

anthropologists don't listen. That academic anthropologists...fail to understand how international organizations work, how epidemic response works, how to add value, and how to work on a team. If you want a "seat at the table" then you have to understand the table... You have to look at the problem the way the people sitting at the table look at the problem.

Comments like these, in addition to criticism of memos from field-workers on the ground, suggest that anthropologists working from afar might be better equipped to develop general structural critiques and insights that are more nuanced than other accounts—as in the case of the "glossy" paper resulting from the emergency meeting. But we may be less equipped for recommending specific actions on the ground that do not simply conform to "global health anthropology" boilerplate (Biruk 2014). Put another way, relevance depends on making a variety of connections explicit. This includes connections between ideas and conceptual frames, between distant and proximal actors, and among those situated outside formally accepted institutions. In the next section, I briefly address these concerns by discussing how comments on blogs and Twitter exposed the "leaky" nature of closed spaces and discussions, as it also bridged physical, disciplinary, interpretive, and agentic distances, offering alternative venues for anthropological critique to surface.

***#Ebola, #Anthropology, and #EbolaAnthropology:  
Tweeting at the Margins***

When word about the emergency Ebola meeting began to circulate on social media, a few of my followers on Twitter asked if the meeting would be recorded. I learned that there would be an official presentation open to the public on Friday afternoon, but that there would be no recordings of the group discussions preceding it. Recognizing the potential of Twitter to reach individuals not invited into the meeting room, I offered to live tweet the emergency meeting. Live tweeting links relevance and virality, in that it potentially builds connections and collapses physical distance. Even if does not communicate anthropology's relevance *per se*, it does help to unravel how relevance is collectively imagined and enacted. If critique was off the table in the emergency meeting, it had a seat at the table on Twitter alongside other kinds of anthropological contributions.

Live tweeting can involve providing a straightforward chronicle of events (a kind of short-form fieldnotes exercise, but open for all to see in its most formative stages). It may also involve annotating a conversation or proceedings, while also recapping, and editorializing events as they happen. The tweets are usually indexed with a hashtag, which is searchable through Twitter's search interface.<sup>11</sup> Over the course of the three days I spent in Washington, DC, for the emergency meeting, I alternated between two modes of live tweeting. At the request of the individual tweeting from the Wenner-Gren Foundation Twitter account, I reproduced speakers' remarks during the official public presentation. I provided no interpretive comments. During the closed meeting and in the evenings back at the hotel, I chose to reproduce some speakers' remarks "as is" and "annotate" the conversations we were having—a kind of writing in/at the margin (Kleinman 1997).

The individuals tweeting, favoriting, and retweeting information under the #EbolaAnthropology hashtag, like those circulating listicles, memos, briefs, and white papers, were agents of virality.<sup>12</sup> The attempt to bridge distances between a semi-closed meeting room and potentially interested parties around the globe was yet another way to signal or at least to actively produce some semblance of relevance for a general audience. But as I intimated at the end of the previous section, some of the social scientists gathered around the table at the emergency Ebola meeting found it challenging to construct a unified vision of relevance in which critique was off the table. Many of them, who had little experience in public health or outbreak investigations, also expressed some discomfort chiming in to improve such initiatives. These challenges were compounded not only by a sense of crisis in West Africa, but also a crisis of communication among anthropologists that long preceded the meeting and that continues outside of it (Benton 2014). The crisis is, in part, a product of Africanist anthropology's history, which is

rooted in the unyielding intellectual, institutional, and ideological solitudes and bitter contestations among the producers and consumers of Africanist knowledge who are divided by the inscriptions and hierarchies of race and nationality, locational and spatial affiliations, epistemological orientations, and ambitions. Particularly destructive is the continuing gulf between African American and European American Africanists and between the latter and African scholars. (Zeleza 1997:194)

Zeleza's biting criticism of the state of African studies, written nearly 20 years ago, still rings true for US Africanist anthropology today (Nyamnjoh 2015, Olukoshi 2006:12–13). Even as anthropologists have attempted to be more reflexive and self-critical about its fraught past, the racial dimensions of our critique remain marginal (Harrison 2008:8–13).

A few days before the emergency meeting was scheduled to take place, the AAA circulated an official announcement. It included a list of “moderators” and a description of the agenda for the “leading anthropologists” who convened for the meeting. Jemima Pierre (2014), a Haitian-American anthropologist who works in West Africa, Haiti and the US, tweeted, “An all white academic panel on Ebola and Africa—in DC of all places—sponsored by @AmericanAnthro. This is problematic.” The tweet, which called explicitly “called out” the AAA (i.e. by using its Twitter handle), elicited several retweets, favorites and views—but no response from the organization. Discussions with meeting organizers after the event, however, showed that they went to great lengths to try to secure visas on short notice for participants from West Africa. Pierre and I began a discussion on Twitter about the meeting, but as our conversation became more politically sensitive, I asked her to “DM me” (send a direct message to me on Twitter), to keep the substance of our conversation away from prying eyes.<sup>13</sup> There she listed a handful of African and African American scholars based in DC who had spoken publicly about Ebola.

How were we to interpret inattention to racial optics in official statements, especially in this viral “post-production” environment “where every moment is a potential photo-op and every outing is the final performance” (Davis 2015)? As I learned from attendance at two presentations by one of the meeting's organizers, the excitement generated by “Ten Things...” listicle inspired AAA's official involvement in and multiple donor support for the emergency meeting (Sangaramoorthy and Benton 2015, see Liebow's comment). So it is worth acknowledging that racial critiques were also represented among the comments critical of the blog post. Two commenters felt that the listicle belittled local efforts and capacity to handle the Ebola crisis, and that it was rooted in an assumption of white, Western intellectual superiority:

Aisha Fofana Ibrahim says:  
September 28, 2014 at 7:45 am

As profound as some of the points raised in this essay are, I can't shake the feeling of "oh we need to go help out those poor Africans who lack the academic expertise to direct or contribute to how the ebola crisis is being handled in their countries"

Moses says:

October 3, 2014 at 11:12 am

Ibrahim Fofana: I agree. The article smells a bit like you put it. Something unnerving about the manner in which article other[ises] the object of focus, somewhat undermining the tangential point the author is trying to make—that local knowledge is important in disease surveillance and control and anthropologists can help bridge the knowledge gap between the local and the global.

The two comments resemble critiques long articulated by black African and diaspora scholars about Africanist scholarship and which certainly influenced Pierre's concerns about white leadership (Amory 1997, Harrison 2008, e.g. Skinner 1976). These critiques have highlighted how Africanist scholarship has long centered the concerns and interests of white, Western scholars and rested on the presumption of their intellectual superiority—even if this is explicitly not their intention. It is, in other words, systemic, more than conscious individual or personal preference. My somewhat generous hunch, based upon retrospective discussions with some meeting participants, is that a sense of crisis provoked by Ebola hindered efforts to include more US-based West African scholars in US anthropology discussions, and when they were involved, they played auxiliary roles in stories that might otherwise feature them as significant characters. The danger here is that Africanist anthropology, as anthropologist-turned-sociologist Archie Mafeje (1998) once charged, could render itself irrelevant to African concerns, by minimizing (if not altogether excluding) African voices, epistemologies, and methodologies, except as "data."

This is not to say that placing more West African scholars on a list of moderators or "leading anthropologists" would necessarily allay concerns about "other-izing" people in Ebola-affected countries: being black or African does not confer automatic immunity from adopting white supremacist ideas (Fanon 1967, Nyamnjoh 2004:338–339). It is important to note, however, that *not* relegating African actors to the margins of an anthropological response (as such knowledge, ironically, serves as its foundation)

might have shifted how anthropology's relevance was articulated, imagined, and enacted for an Ebola response. Highlighting that relevant anthropological insights would come from "leading anthropologists" may have contributed to this sense of exclusion.

As African literature scholar Aaron Bady (2015) writes, "Majority groups tend to dominate 'best of lists' because that's what 'best of' lists are good for. They are excellent instruments for naturalizing exclusion... [such lists] give ideological cover to those who would like to believe their work has been praised on its merits (and that those who have been excluded, in some sense, deserve it)" (see also Nyamnjoh 2004). The concerns regarding race and nationality raised by outsiders-within like Pierre, Moses, Ibrahim, become more important as we recognize and take seriously the inequalities shaping whose knowledge is valued in anthropology, what barriers have yet to be overcome in the production and use of anthropological knowledge, and whose intellectual contributions matter when anthropology tries to prove its relevance to a broader public and to groups working in the field (cf. Collins 1986, Harrison 2012, Mkandawire 1997).

### **Shedding: Exhausting Old Arguments About Race in Africanist Anthropology**

Early in the meeting, I became so exasperated by what was being said that I tweeted, "White privilege is a hell of a drug #watchingothersgethigh." I composed it furtively—that is, without the #EbolaAnthropology or #EbolaAnthro hashtags—because I worried that my mostly white anthropologist colleagues, all seated within feet of me, would be offended if they were to read it. I am not even sure which specific statement or individuals provoked the tweet because I had deliberately removed any "index" that could have properly anchored the statement in the context in which I wrote it. The timestamp, date, and sequence affixed to all tweets, however, provide some clues. (It was near the beginning of the meeting, during opening remarks and introductions).

Yet, the statement reveals much more than my personal discomfort with specific utterances. That I deliberately omitted an official hashtag from the tweet should raise questions about the conditions that made me feel that I needed to disarticulate meeting commentary from explicit critiques of structural privilege. Some were linked to the meeting demographics. Around 25 social scientists were in the emergency meeting conference

room; five were black. Three were political scientists who have family ties to Sierra Leone and Guinea and were based at universities in the north-eastern United States. The two remaining social scientists were anthropologists; one of them was from Senegal and had recently served with the WHO in Guinea, but remained silent during the large group discussions. As was often the case, I was the lone African American anthropologist.

Black American authors, Teju Cole and Toni Morrison, have both noted how discussions of racism and white privilege become muted in public discourse, largely to cater to the needs and feelings of white people. For Morrison, “the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture” (1992:8–9). For Cole, Morrison’s “liberal gesture” regarding race is transformed into “policed language” about *racism* and *white privilege*. He writes: “When someone dares to point out something as obvious as white privilege, it is seen as unduly provocative...The effect of this enforced civility is that those voices are falsified or blocked entirely from the discourse” (Cole 2012). By not tagging the tweet with #EbolaAnthropology, I had put civility before social critique.<sup>14</sup>

Because I had stripped the tweet of any indexable link to a broader discussion about Ebola, its relevance to the discussion was similarly diminished. I had effectively removed traces of talk about white privilege from potential circulation with other forms of “relevant” information from anthropologists’ discussions of the Ebola response. Even though questions of race, nationality, and representation among the meeting participants had been discussed by meeting organizers during their planning, the decisions ultimately taken resulted in limited involvement by West African scholars and aid workers. My attempts to circumvent others’ discomfort, to silence a critique so as not to get in the way of actionable recommendations, shows how well the demand to be relevant insinuated itself into individual comportment and public practice. The digital archive of Ebola-related events and the collective anthropological pursuits that coalesced therein, revealed other tensions within US Africanist anthropology. In particular, it “gurgled up” the discipline’s deep and continued entanglement with structural histories of white supremacy and recent association with now-trendy critiques of white saviorism and the “white-savior industrial complex.”

For Cole, the white-savior industrial complex has as its foundation a moral high ground, where “...Africa has provided a space onto which white egos can be conveniently projected. It is a liberated space in which the usual rules do not apply: a nobody from America or Europe can go to

Africa and become a godlike savior or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied. Many have done it under the banner of ‘making a difference’” (2012). It would be sloppy analysis, however, to emphasize the traits, motivations, feelings, or identities of particular individuals or to characterize individual Ebola meeting participants’ motivations in terms of white saviorism. Rather, to invoke the white-savior industrial complex is to make a statement about the *systems and institutions* that normalize and even reward a contradictory “image of African sublime (or this subliminal image of Africa)...of a degenerate entity on the one hand, and of a source of regeneration on the other” (Amselle 2003). That is, Ebola-affected countries were positioned as both lacking in critical expertise (certainly the reality in terms of the number of clinical, epidemiological, and laboratory specialists available to work during the outbreak) and as a field for proving the discipline’s relevance. Ebola helped to regenerate the discipline’s centrality to knowledge production in and about Africa. Biological and social forms of virality intersected in anthropology’s attempts to be relevant.

It required an inflated sense of importance to agree that holding back certain forms of critique—even if begrudgingly—was the key to ensuring the relevance of our insights. It required an extraordinary sense of optimism to believe that our specific insights would make a discernible positive difference in the dynamics on the ground, when we were situated elsewhere and when so many actors were in the mix. An inflated sense of importance, coupled with a healthy sense of optimism, is crucial to, though not sufficient for, the ideological construction of the white savior industry. To further examine this ideological construction, it helps to place equal theoretical emphasis on “white savior” and “industrial complex.” This equal emphasis allows us to pose critical questions about the racialized political economy and industry of salvation. These questions are not new, but they remain under-examined in mainstream anthropology: what inequalities make white saviors, salvation and redemption necessary? What conditions their possibility, profitability, and enrichment? What kind of knowledge accumulates value and what kind is exchanged in a racialized political economy of salvation? How is anthropology as a discipline implicated in these processes and industries?

The answer to the first two questions can be found in ethnographies that describe and disentangle how global racial hierarchies are implicated in the organization and delivery of humanitarian and development aid (the white savior industry *par excellence*, in Cole’s account). Roughly, these

ethnographies show how racialized and gendered norms shape personal motivations to become development and humanitarian workers, pay scale and employment structures, and recruitment practices and policies (Benton 2016, Heron 2007, Goudge 2003). They show how whiteness is, by default, often associated with expertise (Crewe and Fernando 2006, Crewe and Harrison 1998: 28–44). Expatriates working for UN agencies and international NGOs receive magnitudes better compensation than their local counterparts (e.g. Fenwick 2005:506). Certain kinds of qualifications, schools and degrees direct the pipeline from training to work; and the movements of certain workers across the globe are unfettered and generally go unquestioned (Redfield 2012). Similar dynamics operate in both academic and applied anthropology, in terms of how we are sorted into hierarchies on the bases of our institutional affiliations and affines, our areas of study, our h-indices. We are also sorted according to our race, class, gender, and nationality.

The answer to the second question has been addressed in the literature on the political economy of scholarly knowledge production in and about Africa, which posits a range of barriers to equitable acknowledgement of African scholarly production and contributions (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Mkandawire 1997, Nyamnjoh 2011, Skinner 1976). The meeting demographics also reflect persistent ambivalence about, if not disdain for, anthropology among African and diaspora scholars. This ambivalence conspires with the social-academic expectation on the continent and in the US of who can reasonably produce anthropological knowledge in and about Africa (Lins Ribeiro 2014:486, Nyamnjoh 2012, Osha 2013).<sup>15</sup> Put another way, the gatekeepers for what constitutes valid contributions to Africanist anthropology largely reside in the West. Africanist anthropology is still widely perceived to be something that white Westerners do.

The third question is most uncomfortable for members of a discipline that valorizes local knowledge, ingenuity, and resilience, and publicly disavows its colonial heritage, while it also unwittingly reproduces colonialism's structural dimensions—white supremacy and anti-black racism—in anthropology departments and in the field (e.g. Brodtkin, Morgen, and Hutchinson 2011, Brodtkin 2014, Nyamnjoh 2011). In the case of the emergency meeting, the political-economic dimensions of this industrial complex are reflected in terms of what pool of scholars is available to participate in such a meeting (due to funding constraints and donor demands), who is offered an invitation, and whose knowledge is authorized

for actionability and relevance. While racist visa restrictions, travel costs, faculty workloads, and the proximity of the meeting's timing to the annual AAA meetings, certainly influenced who could be present, factors like the ones I outline above also matter. If we are to take seriously the affective dimensions of the white-savior industrial complex, we might also ask who and what is "regenerated" or redeemed through such a gathering (Mutua 2001:207–208). At the end of the meeting, despite some participants' misgivings (again, conceded in later discussions with them elsewhere), most expressed satisfaction regarding their participation: good feelings about having *done something*.

If "having been there" was sufficient for making relevant anthropological contributions to Ebola containment efforts in West Africa, then having witnessed anthropology's post-colonial identity crisis, in which it had to reckon with "decolonization" in its ranks, did not prove relevant to transforming the racial optics of anthropology's Ebola intervention. In this way, my criticism of the racial and national composition of a pool of "leading anthropologists" to address Ebola is not about the simple numbers of black scholars present at the meeting. Rather it is a diagnosis of a social pattern, of historical continuity that has implications for anthropological praxis. It is a critique of whether and how we choose to confront and address the legacies of exclusion, which may be an equally appropriate measure of our relevance in times of crisis.

Attentive to Moore's framing of processual ethnography as history in the making uncovered through analysis of diagnostic events, I pored over the Twitter archive, seeking to pin down critical #Ebola moments. I also revisited and consulted the work of African and African diasporic scholars who became disillusioned with Africanist anthropology and their marginalization within it. In visiting these two sets of digital archives, I experienced what Alang described as the digital archive's terror: "not that it reveals some awful act from the past, some old self that no longer stands for us, but that it reminds us that who we are is in fact a repetition, a cycle, a circular relation of multiple selves to multiple injuries" (2015). We had been here before, struggling to justify our relevance to ourselves and to others, all the while struggling against colonial impulses.

Positioned as an outsider-within, I experienced the "terror" of the digital archive as a "distance-near" phenomenon in which the center and margins are "created together, then separated by vast distance, yet move in unison" (Shabazz 2015, cf. Bhabra 2015:2316–2319). We were moving

together to address the crisis, but we were failing to bridge the vast distances among us—and to the systems that reinforced them. Indeed, responses to earlier versions of this essay questioned whether a racial framing provided an objective account of an anthropological response to Ebola. Could an African American woman anthropologist perform and embody the “interpretive distance” required to objectively assess the effects of an Ebola response in West Africa? The question itself suggests that a critical racial analysis attentive to the political economy of anthropological knowledge production has not yet gone viral.

### **Preliminary Conclusions**

Were we already relevant? This largely depends on when you asked and whom you asked. Anthropologists were key social analysts on the ground when Ebola first hit Guinea. Their insights about safe burials, community “reticence,” and government-led containment and treatment efforts were crucial in early conversations about the unfolding disaster in Sierra Leone and Liberia (Anoko 2014, Faye 2015, Frankfurter 2014, Farmer 2015). Anthropologists working outside the region provided keen insights about the social and cultural milieu that served as a corrective to journalistic accounts about bushmeat and community “riots.” The UNMEER head’s swan song op-ed in the *New York Times* celebrated an anthropologist’s contributions, while also lamenting her ephemeral presence as evidence of the UN’s systemic failures (Banbury 2016). It may not be possible to fully account for the impacts of anthropological interventions—particularly those that occurred off-site. I would argue that, at worst, many of anthropologists’ achievements occurred irrespective of certain collective efforts—rather than because of them. At best, collective efforts shed light on the potential contributions of anthropological analysis in times of crisis. Yet, for future anthropological responses to crises—epidemic or otherwise—it may be useful to rethink or reformat the connections upon which relevance relies: connections to what can be known, and what anthropology’s contributions might be within the advancement, production, and circulation of useful knowledge. ■

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>Anthropologists at The George Washington University hosted the meeting, which was co-sponsored in part by the American Anthropological Association and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. Other sponsoring institutions included the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, International Development Research Centre, the Society for Medical Anthropology, and the World Council of Anthropological Associations.

<sup>2</sup>In the United Kingdom, United States, and continental Europe, collective efforts to integrate anthropological insights into official Ebola responses were organized through digital clearinghouses to facilitate remote access to research and other potentially pertinent material. I use “the US anthropology Ebola response” throughout the paper to refer to activities officially endorsed by professional association. This does not include consulting work or independent research conducted by anthropologists (which are somewhat connected to these broader efforts). This designation of “the US response” also serves to distinguish it from official UK and EU responses because the mechanisms setting them into motion were quite different: the UK government agencies responsible for Ebola response explicitly engaged social scientists, funded their participation and coordinated a formal mechanism for their involvement. Intergovernmental agencies like the World Health Organization, and non-governmental organizations, like MSF or Save the Children, employed anthropologists according to the needs or demands for labor in the three countries.

<sup>3</sup>The bifurcation of the field and the office is social product of NGO and academic research in international contexts. The field, for example, is where information is collected and generated. The office is where information is translated into data: it is presumably where data are entered, coded, analyzed, and interpreted.

<sup>4</sup>There are, of course, exceptions to the ambivalence about studying cultures “at a distance.” The practice has a long history in anthropology—from so-called armchair anthropology, to the practices of wartime anthropology (Cina 1976, Der Derian, Udris, and Udris 2010, Gusterson 2009), multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), “shadowed” ethnography (Nordstrom 2000), and anthropology of virtual worlds (Boellstorff 2010, Bonilla and Rosa 2015, Postill and Pink 2012).

<sup>5</sup>A fellow Twitter follower and I communicated with MSF via Twitter and email, providing feedback on how the use of culture as a barrier could hamper their efforts in the field. They incorporated our feedback into their slides.

<sup>6</sup>FTW means “for the win” and is commonly used internet slang (ironically and sincerely) to celebrate success or something *awesome*.

<sup>7</sup>The listicle includes an extensive list of anthropologists who work in the Ebola-affected region, in a move that simultaneously draws them into the conversation, mobilizes their collective expertise, and validates the author's expertise. Their inclusion as “un-consulted” but highly knowledgeable anthropologists enlists them in a cult of expertise—a list of relevant actors linked to prominent institutions—later described as “leading anthropologists” in an official press release.

<sup>8</sup>One tweet by the former head of the UN mission tasked with coordinating the Ebola response included an image of his brochettes, chips and salad dinner at a roadside restaurant in southeastern Sierra Leone. When he was criticized for sharing food photos during a food shortage, he promptly deleted the tweet.

<sup>9</sup>This reflects a broader trend within academia to make their work relevant to policymakers and a general audience and to have this ‘count’ towards tenure and promotion (Biswas and Kirchherr 2015, Perry 2010).

<sup>10</sup>Email communication, October 11, 2014.

<sup>11</sup>Tweets, retweets, favorites are communicative practices that have inspired a growing number of scholarly essays in anthropology (Postill 2015; Coleman 2010). The hashtag has also evolved as a medium of sociality. As Brian Solis writes, “...what started out as a way to index conversation in Twitter has now substantially altered how people convey, relay and discover information in and out of the popular nichework” (Solis 2011). Similarly, anthropologist John Postill (2013) who writes about social movements and digital media has noted that “the hashtag ...produces the experience of being ‘in the digital crowd.’”

<sup>12</sup>Thanks to Siddhartha Mitter for suggesting this.

<sup>13</sup>In the months preceding the writing of this essay, scholars of color had been targeted for harassment and termination of their employment, for expressing their views about racism, Israeli occupation, and misogyny on social media.

<sup>14</sup>In critical pedagogy, this phenomenon is described in terms of “white fragility,” the stress resulting from an “insulated environment of racial privilege [that] builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress” (DiAngelo 2011:55).

<sup>15</sup>Many of my African diaspora colleagues who trained in anthropology often find that African and African American Studies and other area studies departments are more supportive of their scholarly and political projects.

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