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Note from the Chair

This spring newsletter is brimming with interesting things for you to read, including a fun story about Angela Close’s archaeological adventures, the latest news about faculty and graduate student research, and a new feature that we think you’ll enjoy. We’re starting a regular column called “Of Course,” which will feature one of the courses currently being taught. In this way we hope to keep you abreast of the latest twists and turns in the teaching of anthropology. Depending on when you were part of the department, you may very well wonder whether this is still the same discipline you once knew and loved.

With all the news to share, I don’t want to take up too much space here with a standard note from the chair, singing the praises of our current activities. But I do want to let you know a few things. We’re currently interviewing some excellent candidates for two new hires, one in archaeology and one in sociocultural anthropology; we’ve just admitted next year’s crop of graduate students, some of whom are so spectacular that we proclaimed we’d “lie down and die” for them; and, as all this occurs on the home front, faculty members continue to traverse the globe to present their work at national and international conferences.

But what I most want to communicate to you — without taking up any more room — is that I hope you enjoy the newsletter. And remember that we’d love to hear from you!
I had not wanted to do a field season in Sinai. I was, in the long dark of the night, convinced that it would all be a disaster. However, while such considerations might seem pressing and very real, the downside of receiving an NSF grant, as Professor Grayson wisely remarked, is that one then actually has to go and do the work.

And so, late one night in mid-June, 1995, I found myself on a flight, rapidly descending towards the Cairo airport. Bahay Issawi nobly met me at the airport and drove me into town, recounting happily how well arrangements were going for setting up the camp. We had long ago agreed that I needed two of his men, Daoud Mohamed, driver and mechanic without peer, and Ahmed Badawi, cook, back-up driver, and all-round surly soul. As we drove into Cairo, Bahay suggested that perhaps I needed a third helper and he had the very person in mind: his son, Yasser. The next day, I learned that, being Sinai, I must also hire a guard. The University of Illinois expedition, after all, had their toilet-tents stolen, and few greater inconveniences can be imagined. And so there were four.

Cairo was bakingly hot, dusty, gritty, and, at $6 a night, one can hardly expect air-conditioning. Nonetheless, it was pleasant. Tom Minichillo, UW graduate student, and I were the only guests in the Garden City House and had at our disposal all of the hotel's facilities, such as they are. I had never before been in Cairo in summer and I was entranced by the nights. The mornings were busy with getting things done before the heat of midday, the afternoons were long, soporific and uncomfortable, but the city reawoke in the evenings. At midnight, the shops were open, the streets were crowded, and all of the bridges were awash with people strolling, seeing and being seen, or simply watching the river. From a distance—from a riverside cafe with a glass of beer—Cairo strongly resembled Faerie.

Water, meanwhile, was everyone’s obsession, and was carried everywhere in lumpy canteens that were resented for their weight when full and for their emptiness when light. Lunch was the same every day and, as a routine of excessive physical exertion was established, became a very serious business: bread, a hard-boiled egg (one each, or riots ensued), a piece of cheese each and one or two extra, a small tin of tuna to be shared, tomatoes, cucumbers, and woe betide Ahmed Badawi if he should forget the onion.

By three or half past in the afternoon, archaeology had lost its allure; in El Qaa, archaeology was not so much unalluring as ineluctably impossible by midday. The evenings were occupied with endless cups of tea, the writing of notes, futile attempts to bathe, endless cups of tea, the writing of notes, futile attempts to bathe, and even more futile attempts to cool off. Whatever vegetables Ahmed Badawi produced for dinner (we were a meatless camp) were devoured within minutes. By nine o’clock everyone had had their toilet-tents stolen, and few greater inconveniences can be imagined. And so there were four.

With the departure of Bahay and the arrival of the polymath Petrie Professor Fekri Hassan, we transferred our efforts to the western side of El Qaa, of which memories are shrunked principally in heat. An initial attempt to reach the coast was thwarted by the discovery that an oil company had not merely privatized the coastal road, but had also laid pipelines across all possible routes of access to it. Daunted neither by this nor by my refusal to drive the overland route, Fekri led a hike over the mountains to the idyllic coastal oasis of Ras Abu Suweira—surveying, of course, along the way. The three lost members of the Coast Guard defending Ras Abu Suweira were shocked and baffled by our incursion into their palm-trees and properly demanded to see our security permits. Our permits, they told, were in the car, which mollified them for the ten minutes it took to realize there was no car. Claims that the cars were two hours away on the other side of the gebel were received with appropriate skepticism, but duty had by then been done and the matter was pursued no further. We were later to return there by car, and the coast guards were relieved to find that we had permits after all. It was the only occasion on which we ever showed them, which was good, because it was also the occasion of our discovering that some geographically challenged cleric in Cairo had granted us freedom not of the Plain of El Qaa, but of the Beqa Valley.

We were not, however, there only to enjoy the pleasures of warm Arabian nights, and, five days later, we dutifully headed out of town in a respectable Nissan pickup and a Land-Rover of such vintage that it would be protected under the antiquities laws of most countries.

El Qaa was a standard-issue, geological survey camp, centered upon the dining tent. Insofar as routine was possible, we settled rapidly into one. The kitchen staff awoke first, and I awoke when the effects of the previous night’s shisha caught up with Ahmed Badawi’s lungs. On mornings when he failed to cough on schedule, I simply overslept. Tom answered the call of his alarm clock at five and spread the pain to everyone else at quarter past; he normally received polite responses. The vehicles left camp at six in search of archaeology. There was an all-around feeling of failure if departure was as late as 6:30, and such tardiness was accordingly rare. As befits a survey season, most of our days were spent striding across the landscape, or scrambling up and down the gebels that make up so much of Sinai’s surplus geology. The landscape is truly spectacular, but it is not kind to archaeologists.

The nights were crowded, and all of the bridges were awash with people strolling, seeing and being seen, or simply watching the river. From a distance—from a riverside cafe with a glass of beer—Cairo strongly resembled Faerie.

We soon learned that sites tend to exist on top of terraces, wadi-fans, or erosional remnants. Ascent, when possible, was always easier than descent, and one was not comforted by the thought, “I shall die on top of this gebel, because there is no way I can ever get down again.”

Archaeological Expedition to Sinai: The Unofficial Report by Professor Angela Close

Archaeological Expedition to Sinai: The Unofficial Report by Professor Angela Close
Graduate Student Studies HIV Risk and Behavior in Kenya

We often read about it in the newspaper or hear about it on the radio: HIV/AIDS has devastated large parts of sub-Saharan Africa. In some cases, women at a low risk for HIV contract the deadly virus—along with other STDs—from their husbands or boyfriends, who have themselves been infected by high-risk women (sex-workers and casual partners).

Amidst these bleak reports, however, you may not have heard that Matt Steele, UW graduate student in biocultural anthropology, has conducted a study of HIV risk and protective behaviors among a sample of over 500 men living in economically depressed areas of Nairobi, Kenya. Beginning in 2002, Steele collaborated with research groups at the University of Nairobi to better understand sexual risk behaviors in the context of poverty and transience.

In the study, Steele found that men were knowledgeable about HIV and its impact on themselves and their families. Over half of the men in the study knew four or more people who were infected with, or who had died from, HIV. Unfortunately, risky behaviors persisted, as few men reported consistent (100%) condom use, and nearly one in five reported having multiple sex partners during the period of the study. This work has intensified Steele’s interest in rubrics for decision-making about risky sexual behavior, given the level of uncertainty in these men’s daily lives and the myriad causes of extreme poverty and mortality in Kenya today.

Steele also conducted a pilot study to explore the potential of using microbicides (a topically applied product) to prevent the sexual transmission of HIV and other STDs. In this study, men used three topical microbicide formulations for a total of eight weeks. Men were amenable to using the microbicides and had few negative dermatological side-effects during the trial. Data from the study were used to support a recently-initiated clinical trial with Kenyan couples, which will assess the effects of men’s use of microbicides on STD recurrence in their primary sex partners.

A grant from the National Institute of Health and a Fogarty International Foundation Fellowship funded his research. In addition to finishing his dissertation, Steele works on HIV and STD prevention projects in the developing world under the auspices of the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH), a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Seattle.

Of Course:

Anthropology 469 “Surfacing the Body Interior”

What do medical imaging in the United States, witchcraft accusations in South Africa, organ theft in Brazil, Ayurvedic medicine in India, and the Society for Mutual Autopsy in nineteenth-century France all have in common?

The students in Janelle Taylor’s Fall 2003 seminar, “Surfacing the Body Interior,” spent ten weeks grappling with this very question. They explored ethnographic studies of some of the different ways—high-tech, low-tech, and no-tech—that what lies hidden within the body is made manifest and known. The title of the course is also the title of a major review article that Taylor is preparing for the prestigious journal Annual Reviews in Anthropology. Teaching a course on the subject was, in her view, a way of bringing students into her research process. “The students and I really were exploring this together,” says Taylor. “I didn’t have this all figured out ahead of time.”

Thinking about how and why people peer inside bodies is not a new preoccupation for Taylor, a medical anthropologist who has been in the Department of Anthropology since 1999. Her previous research has explored social and cultural dimensions of obstetrical ultrasound, a medical imaging technology familiar to many as the source of those blurry black-and-white prenatal “baby pictures” that show up everywhere—from baby albums to product advertisements and abortion-debate polemics.

The concept of surfacing the body interior, however, is a new one. “I am trying to ask questions in new ways,” says Taylor. “I’d like to see anthropologists who study high-tech medicine approach it in ways that allow us to draw connections among things that might, on the surface level, seem to have nothing in common.” The concept of “surfacing the body interior,” she believes, might help people think comparatively about ways of knowing the body.

In addition to those mentioned above, specific topics students thought about comparatively included: changing definitions of brain-death; controversies surrounding the origins of a human cell line widely used in biological research; tensions between the surviving kin of organ donors and organ procurement agencies; rumors of blood-stealing in East Africa; the National Library of Medicine’s “Virtual Human Project” (in which an executed convict was transformed into a “virtual cadaver” posted on the Internet—see http://www.nlm.nih.gov/research/visible/visible_human.html); PET scanning and changing understandings of personhood; ultrasound imaging and the American abortion debate; scientific efforts to locate bodily evidence of criminality and homosexuality; sex-change operations; grooming and dress among the Kayapo Indians of Amazonia; and connections between autopsy and film in turn-of-the-century Italy.

“This class was one of the most stimulating classes I’ve taken,” one student commented. “Working together through the quarter to tie these diverse readings together was a wonderful way to ‘stretch’ as a class.”
Entrepreneurial Spirit Makes Department Holiday Bazaar a Success

Members of the anthropology department demonstrated entrepreneurial savvy as they embarked on a new fund-raising venture: the first-ever, pre-holiday “Books, Baubles, and Baked Goods Bazaar,” held December 1 and 8, 2003. The colorful event attracted students, faculty, and staff from all over campus in search of unique holiday gifts, new and used books, and delicious baked goods made by departmental volunteers-turned-pastry-chefs.

All items were generously donated by faculty and graduate students. These included textiles, jewelry, silk scarves, clothing, baskets, carvings, pots, photographs, and other items from all over the world. All proceeds—which totaled slightly more than $3,000—will go to support department colloquia, student attendance at professional conferences, and department brown-bag lunches with invited speakers.

The success of this first sale has inspired department members to make next year’s sale an even bigger and better event. As faculty and graduate students conduct their research around the globe, they will no doubt be on the lookout for appropriate items to donate next time. In the midst of institutional budget cuts, developing an entrepreneurial eye has become one way to creatively sustain the resources that support the intellectual life of our graduate students.

Stephanie Cohn—Academic Counselor, Rhetoric Expert, Gardener Extraordinaire

Stephanie Cohn is the anthropology department’s academic counselor for undergraduates. Stephanie brings to her role many layers of experience with the department. Not only did her oldest daughter Amanda major in anthropology at the UW, but Stephanie took—and greatly enjoyed—many anthropology courses while completing a BA in English here in 1989.

Stephanie went on to also earn an MA in speech communication at the UW, employing the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, Paul Ricoeur, and Gerard Genette among others, for her master’s thesis: “A Narrative Analysis of Rush Limbaugh’s Radio Rhetoric.” She is still fascinated by the way conservative speech’s use of story (especially Edenic myth) so often overshadows liberal speech’s use of argument. While pursuing her MA, Stephanie taught “Introduction to Public Speaking” tutored in the English department’s Writing Center, and helped fellow graduate students revise their theses.

She and her husband now divide their time between Capitol Hill and Mason County, where she volunteers with the Master Gardener program. Using her modest rhetorical skills, she designs and teaches curricula for summer school programs. She also speaks to various garden shows and organizations, where she never shies away from any topic (“Wild Edibles” is most often requested), so long as she can sneak in a message she is passionate about: most of nature’s “pests” are beneficial in some way. It is pesticides that are the problem, she says.

Stephanie enjoys kayaking, bird-watching, the Seattle Opera, and, of course, anthropology students.

Have You Visited the Anthropology Department Website Recently?

Check out www.anthro.washington.edu, where we have two new sections that might interest you.

The first is News and Events, where each week we list University of Washington events, exhibits and seminars that are of anthropological interest. We also occasionally list interesting news items about our faculty, students and alumni.

Visit weekly and stay in touch.

The second new section is called Friends and Alumni. It includes links to on-line giving and forms you can download to support the anthropology department. You can also read all about the undergraduate and graduate student projects funded in part by friends and alumni.

We value your feedback and hope to make the website useful for you. Please let us know if there are any ways in which we can improve it. Feel free to e-mail the web master, Kathy O’Connor (occonnor@u.washington.edu), with your suggestions.