

NEWS & OPINIONS

Riding the Roller Coaster: A Review of the 116th Meeting of the American Anthropological Association

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As a graduate student, I spend most of my time oscillating between thoughts of my absolute brilliance and my sheer stupidity. Of course, I am exaggerating, albeit ever-so-slightly. Graduate school, for many, is a time to find your voice and to give voice to your passions. For others, the expectations and pressures can be too much to bear. In either situation, there is something inherent in the design of graduate school that causes you to measure yourself, to see if you have what it takes to run with the best of the best. Once you have made the determination that you do, in fact, have what it takes, attending conferences in your discipline is the next step. For me, attending the American Anthropological Association (AAA) meetings, this past November, was my next step.

The weeks leading up to the AAA meetings were filled with excitement, anxiety, doubt, hope, and extreme curiosity. As I dreamt of what this experience would be like, mostly I thought about all of the people I hoped to hear speak. As someone who focuses on the Anthropology of Christianity, those names were Joel Robbins, Simon Coleman, Tanya Luhmann, and Matt Engelke. I also hoped to meet or at least be able to listen to Viveiros de Castro, and Holbraad and Pedersen, who are leading the charge in exploring the ontological turn. I was also hoping to meet people who had done some specific research close to my own interests. My master's thesis will be on conversion in Nepal, so I was hoping to meet Tom Fricke and Ian Gibson as well.

My point is that, as I prepared for the conference, I had high hopes of at a minimum listening to these great thinkers talk on subjects I cared about, and at a maximum, being able to dialogue with them about new theories and new fascinating research. In my nervous energy, I created business cards, and brought out my dress-to-impress clothes, and left no stone unturned in my "I'm gonna make a great impression" campaign. It is interesting how our imaginations can create

atmospheres that are full of hope, but naively disconnected from reality. I don't want this to come across as any sort of Debbie Downer. There were parts of this experience that were magnificent. But I would like to take you on a journey, and explore the positive and enriching, as well as the discouraging, occurrences of my first experience at the AAA meetings. I want to end on a happy note, so first we will look at the discouraging portion of the event.

As anthropologists, we believe that we are open to people who see things differently than we do. We pride ourselves on not being ethnocentric and on understanding different perspectives. Yet somehow, in the midst of our self-professed tolerance, there is an incredibly disturbing lack of tolerance towards Christianity. On my very first night at the meetings, I found myself at a reception after the keynote session. I was with several other people who were established scholars gathered around a small table. As we went around making introductions, I gave an honest introduction that included the fact that I am a graduate student in a "Theological and Cultural Anthropology" program. The immediate response every time I labeled myself as a Christian, or as theologically engaged, was pure vitriol. One professor proceeded to vent for close to half an hour on "how intolerant Christians are and how they have pulled the wool over people's eyes." She went on to denigrate specific churches because "they preach the prosperity gospel." Actually, I had personal knowledge of the church she was maligning, and knew that that church had absolutely nothing to do with the prosperity gospel. This professor demonstrated a complete disrespect for opposing opinions. As a graduate student who is being trained to respond critically to different epistemological stances, I found it incredibly disappointing to have to listen to impassioned arguments with no substantive merit.

Another disappointing thing about the AAA meetings was the rushed time structure. The

conversation after panels was often limited to five or six minutes, which felt very abortive. If more time would have been allowed for the conversations, I believe they could have produced some new and exciting ideas. Longer conversations take on a laboratory quality, which if given the freedom allows people to test ideas and solutions in synergistic interactions with one another.

Now that we've seen what was disappointing, let's turn our gaze to some things that were really exciting. For this, I have many positive and enriching experiences to choose from. One of the highlights for me was the genuine conversations I had with people I respect in the field. I wrote on Facebook on December 1", "There's a weird dance here, where people who wrote books you've read are suddenly not only heroes and/or villains but also peers." For me, that peer moment happened on Friday morning when there was a panel convened and entitled, "Theologically Engaged Anthropology: Author Meets Critics." Derrick Lemons from the University of Georgia was responding to critics of his soon to be published book. It was an amazing discussion with presentations from Ingie Hovland, Todd Whitmore, Elayne Oliphant, and Eloise Meneses. After all the presentations were completed, Simon Coleman discussed the papers and opened the floor to further conversation. Later that day, I had a chance to have a brief conversation with Simon Coleman, a moment that was incredibly serendipitous to me. Moments like that in which you have conversations with people whom you respect, and who are talking to you as though you are a peer, are profoundly honoring moments. There were other such moments, that were just as deeply enriching.

Choosing which session to attend, out of literally thousands, is difficult. It is inevitable that you will miss great topics only to find yourself listening to others which may or may not be equally invigorating. I listened to presentations on the use of olfactory stimulation in Eastern Orthodox services in Lebanon, and on the semiotics encapsulated in John 1:1 which describes Jesus as the word become flesh. I listened to Tanya Luhrmann consider the connection between schizophrenia and shamans in Africa, and I listened to Joel Robbins drop a one sentence ideological bomb about the Lutheran perspective on grace versus works and how that breeds passivity. There were many presentations that I missed out on because of timing conflicts: it seemed as though I would have nothing of interest for hours and then suddenly a flurry of good topics all going on at the same time.

I attended a meeting for the Network of Christian Anthropologists, where we briefly discussed the challenges of being in a discipline that is not very accepting of Christians. There were approximately 40 or so people in the room. Some of them were

professors at Christians universities like Wheaton, but the majority were from secular universities. It was interesting to see the wide range of topics that people were researching in the group. Quite a number of people were doing research in South Africa, and an equally significant number were studying sexuality. It was thrilling to see Christians thriving in the field of anthropology.

I also attended a business meeting for the Society for the Anthropology of Religion. This was an interesting moment to witness the behind the scenes work that goes into leading a society of anthropology. I watched as Elizabeth Perez was awarded the Geertz Award for her new book, *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions*. Her book sounds amazing, as she describes the cooking done in the kitchen by families as they prepare for Santeria rituals. They also announced a new mentorship program for students in the Society for the Anthropology of Religion. I look forward to getting more information on that program.

Overall, I can say that my first experience at the AAA's was great. I enjoyed the variety of topics, impromptu conversations, and the ability to hear great minds talk about fascinating research. I do look forward to returning to the AAA's as a presenter in the future and am hopeful that tolerance will continue to be a championed virtue throughout the discipline of anthropology.



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