

# **University of Illinois, Department of Anthropology**

## **External Reviewers' Report**

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### **Introduction**

The Department of Anthropology at the University of Illinois is a distinguished program with a long history in American anthropology. It is a "four-field" department, which means that it includes faculty and curricula in archaeology, biological anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and sociocultural anthropology. The four-field tradition, unique to North American anthropology, integrates theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of global human diversity that span the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. It requires thoughtful planning and significant resources to maintain an anthropology department with strong programs across the sub-fields, and some U.S. departments have chosen not to do so. Yet now more than ever, in the face of such global crises as climate change and such advances in knowledge as those emerging in the biological sciences, an anthropology department that can integrate knowledge across the disciplines has an important role to play at any major research university.

The Illinois anthropology department has made significant contributions to all four sub-fields over many decades. Today, the department as a community remains committed to that tradition. But, as we will explain in our report, they need help, in the form of resources and strategic planning, to continue in the four-field tradition, building and maintaining strength in all areas. This will allow them to foster integrative research and discussion within the department, which in turn will nourish their interactions with students and faculty across the university.

Our report contains sections on each of the four subfields, on the undergraduate and graduate programs, on staff and on facilities. It is followed by five recommendations, which are briefly stated but which grow directly out of the other sections of the report.

### **The Four Subfields**

#### **Archaeology**

The Archaeology program at UI has a deep history and has been a notable contributor to knowledge production in reference to Mesoamerica, South America, and the Mississippian region of North America. Currently, the Archaeology staff is composed of 4 full professors, 1 associate professor, and one academic professional who directs the

Museum Studies program. The top-heaviness of the archaeology program has been amplified by the recent departure of an assistant professor but there is a commitment by the department to make another entry-level hire as soon as permission is granted by the administration. Archaeology faculty are concerned that the large number of opportunistic hires in Biocultural Anthropology might diminish their abilities to recover from recent retirements and departures. As a whole, faculty members within the Archaeology program are high performing in terms of grants, field research, and publications. Their research tends to be highly integrative and involve topics such as climate change, religion and ideology, cultural heritage, and distinctive physical signatures of human evolution. This productivity happens despite the marginal research laboratory facilities they are afforded on campus (more below on this). The presence of a single teaching lab for the department also poses a challenge to an effective archaeological-science curriculum.

Archaeologists conduct field research—often during the summer—and are active generators of revenue that universities garner from summer courses. In 2012, UI apparently raised tuition rates for summer courses and this significant increase has negatively impacted the ability to fill archaeological field schools. We advise that the university revisit this decision or set in place more opportunities for financial assistance for summer courses. Within archaeology, summer field schools often provide dissertation material for graduate students in addition to immersion in field research for undergraduates.

There is a sense among the Archaeology faculty that certain kinds of professionalization are lacking for graduate students within the department—particularly the ability to teach stand-alone classes in which the graduate student is the instructor of record. The absence of this opportunity also was noted by at least one graduate student.

There are two programs within Archaeology that are interdisciplinary and, with additional support, could serve as models of integrative research and professionalization on campus. Currently both operate “on a shoestring” and are severely understaffed. MUSE—a museum studies program—offers a graduate minor and an undergraduate concentration. According to Appendix P of the Self-Study, the program serves as “an informal hub of museums-related research on campus” and thus integrates faculty from several departments and schools. The second program, CHAMP—a cultural heritage program—offers a graduate minor and hosts an annual international conference on heritage issues that generally results in a high-profile publication. The program brings together faculty from across the UI campus and serves as another example of leading and integrative scholarship in a field of study that is quickly assuming a compelling importance within contemporary society.

### **Biological Anthropology**

The UI faculty in biological anthropology (BA) comprises one full professor, five associate professors, two assistant professors, one clinical assistant professor, and one instructor, making BA the largest sub-field in the department. Five faculty contribute to

the teaching of human gross anatomy in the medical school. Faculty research interests are broad and run the gamut from human genetics and reproductive ecology to paleoanthropology, skeletal biology, and functional anatomy. The large size of BA in the department is a function of both deliberate hiring and dual career placements. The BA faculty is strong with respect to scholarly productivity and impact.

In recent years, the increasingly biomedical focus of the BA research program has brought to light serious deficiencies in the physical infrastructure and staff support of the research effort. The problems with physical infrastructure are detailed in the Facilities section of this report. The problems of staff support are associated with the increased reliance of BA faculty on external grant support, and the complexity of pre- and post-award administrative work. Staff dealing with grant matters in the department have been of limited competence, and have not lasted long in post. They, in turn, have had to deal with a new, computerized system for approving expenditures that has proven highly problematical. The net effect has been to put an increasing burden of grant preparation and administration (including all routine budget management tasks) on the faculty themselves. This problem affects archaeology faculty also. An increase in staff numbers (from four to five) and better training of staff charged with grant administration would go far to correcting this problem.

An issue of increasing seriousness for the BA faculty is the lack of advocacy of their collective and individual interests at the level of the Associate Dean for Social Sciences. This is due in part to a lack of understanding of the dual “biological” and “anthropological” nature of BA research and teaching. Winning approval for the “human biology” track within the BA major required more forceful advocacy—on behalf of BA faculty and the Anthropology Department against bullying from powerful biology faculty within the LAS—than the Associate Dean was willing or able to muster. The continued success of BA faculty in achieving IU targets and in securing adequate lab space rests largely on the efforts of the Associate Dean and his or her willingness to “go to bat” for their interests. The BA faculty constitute nearly half of the Anthropology Department’s FTEs, and are costly to hire and retain. It behooves the Dean’s Office to be knowledgeable about BA faculty research and aspirations, and to support their interests in the face of competition and bullying from within and outside the LAS. The perception on the part of BA faculty of increased peripheralization by biology interests on campus and of an unwillingness of deans to advocate on their behalf will lead to future problems of recruitment and retention.

### **Linguistic Anthropology**

The department represents itself as having an integrative, four-field program, and it lives up to this in spirit, with faculty members positively oriented to the concept of a discipline that spans the biological sciences to the humanities and endeavors to bridge the gap between objective and subjective perspectives on human life. Within the larger discipline, linguistic anthropology, while the smallest of the four major subfields, plays a key role. For the past three to four decades, linguistic anthropology has been built around the study not so much of language structures, as in its earlier incarnation. The study of the

structures of the lesser-known languages on the planet continues to be important, but now falls also to departments of linguistics. Contemporary linguistic anthropology instead focuses primarily on discourse (speech, writing, and other modalities) especially in relation to contexts of use. For this reason, it is central to a four-field program, since discourse simultaneously carries subjective meanings and also assumes objective thing-like properties as perceptible qualities, especially sounds but also writing. This links sociocultural studies (through a discourse-centered approach to culture) to biological anthropology, especially primate communication and the evolution of language, and to archaeology, especially epigraphy, but also to the study of the communicative significance of material remains more generally.

While the Illinois department subscribes to the ideal of a linguistic anthropology component, and while this component forms a part of the undergraduate curriculum, we find that the same is not true of graduate training. There appears to be no core course in linguistic anthropology that is required or strongly encouraged for graduate students. We believe that the department needs to decide whether it wants to be a four-field department as regards graduate training, and, if so, it should change its internal culture of student advising and/or change the requirements for graduate students. It also needs to prioritize the hire of a discourse-centered researcher.

The department has seen the retirement of two older-style anthropological linguists, one cognitively and one mathematically oriented. Perhaps owing to the older orientation towards linguistics, the department did not immediately warm to discourse-centered and semiotic research. Today, the principal linguistic anthropologist in the department, Brenda Farnell, specializes in movement and spatial studies, but is burdened with administrative duties. Another faculty member, Adrienne Lo, has not been present for two years and may not be returning. Still another, Jessica Greenberg, is listed as 50% linguistic anthropology and 50% sociocultural, but seems not to be strongly engaged with the sub-field. Yet another, Jenny Davis, has a 75% appointment in American Indian Studies, and a 25% appointment in Anthropology. To sustain an adequate training program at the graduate plane, the University of Illinois requires a full-time appointment in linguistic anthropology of a researcher squarely situated within the sub-field and engaged in discourse-centered research.

### **Sociocultural Anthropology**

As detailed in the department's self-study, the sociocultural anthropology component of the department [hereafter, SC] comprises 13 individuals who, due to split appointments, is "weighted at 10 FTE" (p. 14). As is typical of SC programs, this group covers (in research and teaching) a startling range of topics, theoretical approaches, and geographic areas (see self-study, pp. 14-15). While this allows them to offer courses to students in the department and across the university on a variety of topics of great contemporary relevance, it makes it difficult for them to find the unity of their sub-field within the department.

To some extent, this is typical of anthropology as a discipline. The SC subfield is by far the largest within the American Anthropological Association. But the other subfields, as academic disciplines with distinctive research agendas and methodologies, are less diffuse than SC anthropology. This contrast between SC anthropology and the other subfields was a major topic of discussion during our meeting with the SC group. On the one hand, SC anthropology, both in the discipline nationally and at UI particularly, is at the center of the discipline. But, on the other hand, it is an “absent ... or very weak center,” as one SC faculty member put it. At UI, SC anthropology is a “weak center” because, despite the fact that more than half the department can be categorized in this group, many of them have split appointments or serve in administrative positions. Moreover, this group is “more heterogeneous” than the other subfields, at least in the estimation of SC faculty.

It is important to remark that the SC group feels that relations within the department are good across and between the subfields. But they also suggested that, pulled as they are outward (into administrative and interdisciplinary appointments) and committed as they are to maintaining strength across the subfields, they don’t have time to concentrate on building SC anthropology within the department.

This discussion of the empty center led seamlessly into a discussion of what the SC group perceives to be a lack of community-building activities within the department. In a discussion that matches what we heard from the graduate students, the SC anthropologists particularly remarked on the department’s inability to maintain a departmental colloquium or speaker series. There are specialized talks organized within the other subfields. SC talks, when they occur, can be seen as whole-department talks, but they are not well-attended (by both faculty and graduate students).<sup>1</sup>

These faculty members also thought that the department had to work too hard simply to remain functional. They felt that the curriculum as a whole lacks structure and that the department does not have good routines for matching its teaching personnel to the curriculum, to make sure that all required courses and a good mix of electives are taught each semester at the appropriate levels. We will revisit this issue in the section on the undergraduate curriculum.

## **Programs of Study**

### **Undergraduate program**

At many universities, anthropology at the undergraduate level is struggling to maintain its relevance to a new generation of students (terrorized by the job market) who seek “skills” instead of liberal arts wisdom, leading them to look for things like interdisciplinary programs and experiential learning which, they think, will give them “transcript-able” labels that will make them more “marketable.” These students (understandably enough) do not know that anthropology is an interdisciplinary field with a deep research tradition that can provide students with many of the skills they seek. The UI department, like

many other departments, is working to revise its undergraduate program to make the strengths of our discipline more visible to today's students.

We had the opportunity to speak with six enthusiastic undergraduate majors. Only one (a transfer student) described herself as having only one major (sociocultural anthropology). Two were double-majoring in biology, and the other three were double-majoring (or, in one case, minoring) in an area study.

All of these students praised the department's faculty as passionate about their discipline and as caring undergraduate teachers who support their attempts to carry out research and community-engagement projects. All also saw anthropology as a liberal arts discipline that provided both a theoretical orientation to contemporary problems and opportunities to develop research skills that would be applicable to their careers. But they thought that many of their peers saw anthropology solely as a "very theoretical" discipline and hence not connected to their career plans. The students recommended that the department (1) develop more courses that focus on "engagement" with social issues, (2) promote the idea that fieldwork can be done at home (in other words, that it's not necessary to go far away to "do" anthropology),<sup>ii</sup> and (3) make sure that introductory courses show students that the skills anthropology can teach will be relevant to employers.

Finally, the undergraduates saw the Anthropology website as a major obstacle to the department's attempts to recruit students. As one student put it, tactfully, the website "is not a good first contact." Others said it needs "better information" and that it should be "more accessible." And they said it compared quite unfavorably to the websites of other departments. (In subsequent conversations, we learned that department leaders are well aware of this problem.)

The department is currently working to revise its undergraduate major, not only to increase enrollments but also "to better reflect the contemporary relevance of our discipline" (self-study, p. 6; see also Appendix F of the self-study). While we are intrigued by the direction the department is outlining, we note the tricky organizational problems that undergraduate anthropology programs face. The discipline is already divided into subfields, each of which can be organized as a track or concentration within the overall major. The discipline also seeks to speak to contemporary topics which anthropology, with its integrative approach to human diversity, is particularly well-suited to address.

The trick, then, is to figure out how to maintain, within the major, recognizable tracks or concentrations in the subfields while adding topical or thematic concentrations, such as those identified in Appendix F (p. 49). The list we find there, we think, is too numerous: for administrative purposes, it may be necessary to begin with a smaller number (2-4?) of thematic concentrations. But we think the department has a clear understanding of the revisions the undergraduate program needs (self-study, p. 6) and is headed in the right direction.

We note, finally, that any final plan to revise the undergraduate major should be coupled with new departmental procedures for staffing and scheduling courses in a fair and efficient manner.

## **Graduate program**

To form our assessment of the graduate program, in addition to examining the materials supplied to us and speaking with members of the faculty, we had the opportunity to meet with a group of 10 graduate students and elicit their experiences. We also received email comments from 8 additional students who had been unable to attend the meeting. The students had mainly positive views of the graduate program, and, in particular, were satisfied with the funding they have received and by the support and advising offered to them by members of the faculty. Their chief complaint was the “lack of community” in the department, which, as one student opined, “has a negative impact on feelings of connectedness and of having an intellectual space and home.” Proposed solutions, as we discuss elsewhere in this report, include a renewed colloquium series, even if only one that draws primarily on the research of faculty members in the department and around campus. Some students also suggested additional events that would bring students together with faculty from across the subfields.

While improving the communal life of the graduate student population, the department might also want to consider expanding the shared intellectual experience. That experience could be improved, as one student put it, by “anything that would get us together regularly to talk about ideas.”

The ER committee wondered whether students were getting the breadth of training to which the department aspires. This was true especially in the case of linguistic anthropology, as a separate part of this report makes plain. In a number of other major departments, the latter, with its contemporary emphases on semiotic and discourse-centered research, provides a link between sociocultural, biological, and archaeological approaches. Some students felt also that the student population, as well as the faculty, could be more diverse, though we recognize the challenges involved in attracting and retaining top students and faculty who often have many options.

We understand that the department has recently developed a professionalization seminar and retooled its Illinois Anthropology Seminar. Both of these are welcome developments and appreciated by the students.

Our overall assessment is that the graduate program is healthy and provides a sound training for its students. While a decision needs to be made regarding linguistic anthropology, and while the program could be improved with closer attention to producing community and more shared intellectual experiences for students, the program is appropriate for a major department.

## **Strengthening the Intellectual Community**

Conferring during and after the department review, our committee came to a consensus that the department—although enjoying the leadership of an extremely competent and

sympathetic Chair—is experiencing difficulty in recovering from a number of adverse events. Chief among these is the loss of a rising star within Archaeology (Andrew Bauer); loss of three faculty members in American Indian Studies to a cluster hire by the University of Minnesota; the continued and unsettled issue of the denial of a position in American Indian Studies to Steven Salaita on the basis of remarks that he posted on Twitter; continued rancor on the part of alumni and others over the retirement (seven years ago) of the racialized sports mascot, Chief Illiniwik, and the failure of the university to adopt a new mascot; and finally the sense that the campus tolerates daily acts of micro-aggression based on race and color, which supports an environment that is not tolerant of diversity.

The department itself is a less diverse place than it was five years ago due to retirements and departures. There is a sense within the department that Target of Opportunity hires on campus are primarily being pursued when they coincide with a spousal hire. The committee recommends that the department take a leading role in initiating discussion on campus about race and racism and consider adopting a new course that would deal head on rather than obliquely with these issues. These actions would serve to mitigate the sense of frustration and futility expressed by some of the faculty members.

Both undergraduate and graduate students expressed satisfaction with the mentoring that they receive from faculty members. Junior and mid-level faculty appreciate the new mentoring programs that have been instated within the past few years to help them manage and direct their careers.

Several graduate students asked for a colloquium series that would build community within the department and facilitate deeper knowledge about ongoing research across the subfields of Anthropology. The committee concurs with this request and sees it as a high priority for strengthening social ties and intellectual cross-fertilization within the department. There is probably no better way to promote integrative research than to showcase the intellectual excitement of it. Colloquia could be organized by calling on the considerable research talents of current faculty members and augmented occasionally by bringing in a speaker from outside the university. Graduate students, in particular, benefit from listening to the presentation of research; it is a key part of their professionalization. In addition to acclimating graduate students to the practice of delivering professional papers, a colloquium series would increase the visibility of the department on campus.

### **Staff of the Anthropology Department**

The department is supported by four staff members who facilitate the following programs and activities: (1) graduate program; (2) undergraduate program; (3) business manager, who handles post-award grant spending; and (4) an administrative assistant. When the staff met with the review committee, they unanimously expressed the sentiment of being overworked and understaffed. This sense is corroborated by the self-study report (p. 17), which provides comparable staff numbers for other departments on campus in relation to



the teaching load shouldered by each department. Our meeting with undergraduate students suggested inconsistencies in how students are handled and inappropriate advice given to undergraduates in the course of advising. (We learned later that department leaders are working to remedy this situation.)

In reference to graduate advising—which is handled by professors—there is a need for more coordination with the office staff in terms of expectations for and timing of graduate student exams and other performance indicators.

As external grant activity—particularly international research—has accelerated among faculty within the department, so has discontent with the lack of responsiveness in post-award grant facilitation. Faculty present their vouchers to the business manager who indicated that processing and payment of vouchers through the Office of Budget & Finance Services is somewhat whimsical and dependent on which individual in the Budget and Finance office processes the voucher. Many are returned and need to be resubmitted. This payment system is increasingly complex and bureaucratic. There does not appear to be any quick and efficient way for Business Managers to master the voucher submission process or to seek mentoring. This problem needs to be addressed in the Office of Budget and Finance Services promptly. Faculty are under intense pressure to bring in grant dollars but they face a wall of bureaucratic hurdles when it comes to spending those grant dollars to conduct research. Post-award grant facilitation seems to be sorely lacking at UI for departments such as Anthropology that do not have staff members whose position description primarily specifies working with faculty PIs on externally funded research.

## **Facilities**

The physical home of the Anthropology Department is Davenport Hall. Built in 1901 to house the College of Agriculture, and occupying a prominent place on the North Quad, Davenport Hall is a UI landmark, which symbolizes part of the University's early, cherished history. Today, the Anthropology Department shares Davenport Hall with the Chemistry Annex of the Chemistry Department, specifically the Chemistry Learning Center. The building last underwent systematic remodeling in the late 1950's. Although the Chemistry Annex is currently undergoing an extensive renovation, the major portion of Davenport Hall occupied by the Anthropology Department has not been systematically renovated and is in a parlous condition.

As the result of increased and diversifying space needs on the part of Anthropology faculty, Davenport Hall has undergone minor renovation and refitting in the last 30 years, including the horizontal division of the upper floor into two floors to accommodate an extra layer of offices and labs. The rooms on this *ad hoc* mezzanine level are windowless, low-ceilinged, poorly ventilated spaces that cannot be dignified as true offices or labs, even though that is what they are used for. At present, there is one teaching lab in Davenport Hall to serve the needs of the several undergraduate and graduate courses that require examination of skeletal, paleontological, and archaeological specimens. This lab

is adjacent to two small, non-climate-controlled storage spaces into which specimens are stacked, floor to ceiling.

All of the department's archaeologists and the biological anthropologists who don't undertake wet lab work have their research labs in Davenport Hall. These are crowded, inadequately lit, poorly ventilated, and highly leak-prone spaces into which students, specimens, and various types of expensive equipment are accommodated. The labs on the building's lowest level are highly flood prone: One lab that was recently remodeled to accommodate the needs of an incoming palynologist/archaeologist was considered such a serious flood risk that he was discouraged from occupying it; this unpromising situation contributed to his taking a competing job offer and. *Ad hoc* renovations for an incoming junior biological anthropologist have been completed, but renovation of lab space "borrowed" from Chemistry for another mid-career biological anthropologist have not yet been started. The several new refrigerators and freezers purchased for storage of biological specimens located in flood prone areas of the lower level of the building are not connected to a central alarm system. All of the research lab spaces in Davenport Hall are structurally and functionally deficient and are an embarrassment to the University. High quality research is being done in these facilities in spite of, not because of, the physical infrastructure.

Biological anthropologists who undertake genomic research and/or who have needs for wet-lab facilities rely on resources at interdisciplinary research centers such as the Woese Institute for Genome Biology (IGB), the Beckman Institutes, or in borrowed laboratory spaces such as in the Medical Sciences Building. DNA processing and sequencing services are available on a user-pays basis from the Carver Biotechnology Center. IGB space is obtainable by invitation only and in association with a specific team-oriented research project. Because IGB projects typically only run for five years, there is no guaranteed continued access to facilities, and faculty must be able to relocate research operations back to their home departments upon expiration of a team project. For biological anthropologists, no back-up facilities exist in Davenport Hall. In order for the department's biological anthropologists and archaeologists to have viable research, the Dean's Office must continue to play an active role in advocating strongly for specialty lab spaces outside of Davenport Hall.

## **Recommendations for the Department of Anthropology**

### **Recommendation 1: Renovation of Facilities and Lab Space**

Plans to undertake major renovation of Davenport Hall have been on the books for over 30 years, and have been repeatedly shelved because of the expense involved. The review committee was told that renovation of Davenport Hall is third on the University's priority list for major reconstruction, but that – realistically – this work will not take place in the next 5-10 years because of budget limitations. Because of this situation, the UI is in a serious dilemma and the future of the Anthropology Department is in peril. The University wants the Anthropology Department to continue to thrive as a unit

distinguished by excellent teaching and internationally recognized research, and be an attractive destination for strong faculty researchers and promising graduate students, but is unwilling to commit to a facilities upgrade that will give the department the chance to make further gains and to even remain viable. While UI continues to invest in the Anthropology Department's future by generous start-up support of new hires and the funding of retention packages, it is losing new hires and will almost certainly lose highly productive and promising mid-career faculty in the future because of the manifest shortcomings of Davenport Hall. In other words, the University will insure the decline of the Anthropology Department, including the loss of prominent faculty, by ignoring the reconstruction and modernization of Davenport Hall.

### **Recommendation 2: Revision of the Undergraduate Major**

The department must complete the work it has begun to revise the undergraduate curriculum. A revised curriculum that highlights the department's topical strengths will help undergraduates to understand what Anthropology has to offer them. In conjunction with this, the department needs to invest in a more accessible and better organized website.

### **Recommendation 3: The Status of Linguistic Anthropology**

The department needs to decide whether it wishes to have linguistic anthropology as one its four fields at the graduate plane, and, if so, it should change departmental culture to encourage graduate students to take a core course in this area; as part of a long-term plan, priority would also have to be given to the hire of a faculty member devoted full-time to linguistic anthropology.

### **Recommendation 4: Establishment of a Colloquium Series**

The committee recommends the establishment of a colloquium series in order to nurture greater intellectual excitement within the Department, greater conversation across the subfields, and greater visibility on campus.

### **Recommendation 5: Long-term Planning for Hiring**

The ER committee observed that, over the last decade or more, the department has added faculty largely through opportunistic hires. Although the results have been generally good, growth has not been guided by a vision of hiring needs. Our committee was repeatedly told by administrators not to expect that the review process will result in the allocation of additional resources for faculty lines in the department at this time. We nevertheless consider it desirable, and even essential, for the department to develop a sequenced plan for hiring over the long-term, a plan that would specify a one-by-one order to future hires. The department has taken a step in this direction in asserting a commitment to rebuild the archaeology faculty (Self-Study Report, p. 10). Such a plan would enable the department to decide whether opportunities for hiring that do arise should be pursued. It would also allow it to more systematically pursue target of opportunity possibilities. Finally, it would position the department to undertake hires, while minimizing internal conflict and

competition among the different subfields, once the administration does allocate new positions.

The review committee recommends that the department should develop a sequenced, long-term plan for hiring that would guide it in making decisions about opportunistic hires, systematically pursuing target of opportunities, and readying itself for allocated positions as those become available.

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<sup>i</sup> We learned later, in email correspondence, that a recently initiated, donor support speakers series on “engaged and applied anthropology” will invite speakers from a range of subfields. The department hopes that this series can function as a department-wide event.

<sup>ii</sup> We are aware that the department was an incubator for the remarkable Ethnography of the University Initiative, but we were given to understand that with Nancy Abelmann’s move to the provost’s office, the ties between Anthropology and EUI have become less robust than they once were.