

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white circular design on the left. The text "Anthropology Book Forum" is written in a large, white, sans-serif font across the top of a dark blue rectangular background.

# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## Perceptions of “Intra-disciplinary” Unity and Division

Review by Anthony R. Tricarico

*These “Thin Partitions:” Bridging the Growing Divide between Cultural Anthropology and Archaeology*

By Joshua D Englehardt and Ivy A. Rieger eds.  
University Press of Colorado, 2017

*These “Thin Partitions:” Bridging the Growing Divide Between Cultural Anthropology and Archaeology* co-edited by Joshua D. Englehardt and Ivy A. Rieger seeks to reexamine if and to what extent the sub-disciplines of Anthropology have become disjunctured. Specifically, Englehardt and Rieger sought to evaluate the historical, contemporary, and future relationship between cultural anthropologists and archaeologists. The edited volume contained twelve single or co-authored chapters, which sought to engage with the idea of “intradisciplinary” theories as a viable tool for unifying theoretical divisions. The editors offered a new and welcome perspective on a debate now spanning decades and across multiple journal articles, books, and special issues (i.e. Ortner 1984; Watson 1995; Gillespie et al. 2003). All of these works have focused on one central question: are anthropology’s four sub-fields unified in their goal of understanding the full breadth of humanity? Conflicting answers to this question arise every few years as if to demonstrate the continuing ontological reflectivity woven into the fabric of anthropology. Ideally the “...roles, goals, and foci of anthropology’s four primary subfields [should] complement and weave back into each other, forming a complex disciplinary whole that is greater than the sum of its individual parts” (4). The editors both argue that the commonalities within each subfield’s history, theories, and methods define anthropology as a unified discipline seeking to understand the human cultural experience from different modes of inquiry. This sentiment has been expressed similarly in other works as well. Most notably, Watson (1995) argued that an archaeological anthropology is the only way of maintaining fruitful collaborations between the disciplines, ensuring that anthropological research remains of “...global importance and great intrinsic interest” (690). However, Englehardt and Rieger, as well as many of the authors across the volume, argue that a critical reevaluation of anthropological theory is needed to ensuring greater collaboration between the discipline's subfields.

Both Englehardt and Rieger cite increased specialization of anthropological conferences as the primary concern behind the inspiration for the volume. Specifically, they point out the contradiction between specialization at a time when many are calling for a more holistic and interdisciplinary anthropology. Englehardt and Rieger question whether the subfields share a similar language, calling for an increase in shared terminology (similar to an argument made by Ortner 1984). Each chapter in the volume is centered on one central question: “How can a renewed emphasis on sub-disciplinary dialogue [i.e.

shared theories and methods] and collaboration benefit anthropology as a whole as it is currently practiced in the twenty-first century?" (4) Each author sought to demonstrate the value of continued collaboration between cultural anthropologists and archaeologists in addressing shared research interests.

Paul Shankman addresses how intra-disciplinary theoretical applications may serve as both unifying and dividing forces in chapter two, titled "'It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time: The Fate of Cultural Evolution in Cultural Anthropology.'" Specifically, Shankman addresses the question: "How did cultural evolution move from mainstream acceptance to marginal status in just a few short decades?" (46) His intent was to examine the history of cultural evolution, a once more prominent theoretical paradigm in anthropology applied by both cultural anthropologists and archaeologists. Shankman argues that cultural anthropologists and archaeologists have shared research interests, highlighting that the "disciplinary divide" is a misrepresentation of the historical and contemporary relationship between the two subfields. The theoretical application of cultural evolution rests on the main premise that culture is adaptive. This notion helps contribute to the integration of cultural and archaeological modes of knowledge construction through the examination of interactions between multiple external and internal causal variables contributing to cultural change through time. "Cultural Evolution" was widely accepted and utilized in both cultural anthropology and archaeology throughout the late-1950s and 1960s, during a period of continued calls of a more archaeological anthropology (i.e. Philip Phillips 1955; Binford 1962). Shankman argued that the theory of cultural evolution helped bridge distinct theoretical traditions in both subfields until the rise of later Geertzian interpretative approaches in anthropology. Interpretative approaches emphasized understanding over explanation, positing "cultural evolution" as an "armchair pursuit." However, Shankman argues that archaeological and socio-cultural theories (utilized together) help create a more complete picture than either discipline creates alone. Shankman's argument echoed that of Ortner (1984) who commented decades earlier on similar perceptions of sub-field divisions. Ortner (ibid) lamented on the growing theoretical divide between each sub-field, though argued that the development of "practice" was reunifying the field under a new guise. Practice theory afforded researchers the freedom to apply a host of theoretical perspectives directly suited for different modes of power embedded across the globe. This principle did not unify the field under one single theoretical paradigm, but under the shared goal of understanding changes across systems (ibid). However, understanding which theory would suit a particular research project necessitates the adequate knowledge of a wide range of anthropological theories.

A varied "toolbox" of theories mandates the training of new anthropologists utilizing a four-field approach. However, Ivy A. Rieger (ch 4) argues that four-field theoretical training is becoming rare at the graduate-level. Rieger's chapter, titled "Ethnographic Stratigraphies: Mapping Practical Exchanges between Cultural Anthropology and Archaeology" argued that graduate training (at least theoretically) has become increasingly specialized contributing to further intra-disciplinary division. Rieger asks, "If we have four subdisciplines housed (typically) within the same university department under the term anthropology, but we do not train our students in the four-field model, then does the utility of said model of disciplinary organization even exist?" (87) As a solution, she argues for greater incorporation of multiple stakeholders in research as a means of developing effective communication between cultural anthropologists and archaeologists. Both cultural anthropologists and archaeologists need to work with local communities to effectively conduct research. Therefore, Rieger argues that fieldwork is the optimal arena for promoting collaboration. However, effective collaboration begins with graduate training. The promotion of a four-field theoretical background provides researchers with the tools to effectively determine which theory is appropriate for the research project. Ultimately, Rieger argues that both cultural anthropology and archaeology inform one another. "...the ways in which

ethnographies and ethnographic field projects are realized, as well as the ways in which archaeological sites and artifacts are interpreted...are all based on the structures of power that resonate with theoretical issues surrounding the dissemination and localization of academic knowledge" (96). Throughout the edited volume, each author continually reexamines the state of anthropological theory and advocates for theory as an effective tool for bridging the sub-disciplinary divide.

David B. Small in chapter 9, titled "The Interface Between Anthropology and Archaeology: A View from Ancient Greece" continues this theme, though disagrees with the intra-disciplinary application of theories. Small instead argues for the development of new theories that cross the sub-field divide. As a classical archaeologist, he offers a different perspective than that of other authors included in the volume. Small notes that most classical archaeologists (housed in classics departments) turn more to theories from fields such as history. He further demonstrated that cross-cultural perspective may serve as the best model of bridging sub-field divisions through the incorporation of his work in Ancient Greece. Small argued that certain research foci (i.e. the investigation of small polities) may be informed best by combining archaeological and cultural anthropological perspectives. However, he rejects the application of sociocultural theory to analyze archaeological questions, calling for the development of new intra-disciplinary theoretical paradigms. Small is quick to note though that there is sparse literature on this subject and few are taking up this call as of yet.

The final chapter of "*These Thin Partitions*" served as a mini-commentary on the chapters presented previously. Chapter ten is comprised of three entries in which each author provided their own analysis of how effectively the work achieved its central goal: to demonstrate the value of continued collaboration between cultural anthropologists and archaeologists in addressing shared research interests. Donna M. Goldstein in her commentary, titled "Anthropological Pasts and Futures" argued that a degree of specialization, condemned by most of the entries, may not be entirely bad for the discipline as a whole. Goldstein (2017) noted that sub-field specialization is not a sign of disunity, but actually a sign of disciplinary maturity. Instead of focusing on the "reunification" of the sub-fields, Goldstein calls on the further development of interdisciplinary collaboration. She notes that interdisciplinary collaboration is a "...productive direction rather than something to lament" (258).

*These "Thin Partitions:" Bridging the Growing Divide Between Cultural Anthropology and Archaeology* co-edited by Joshua D. Englehardt and Ivy R. Rieger offered a lively debate on the future of intra- and inter-disciplinary collaboration in a twenty-first century anthropology. Each author was unified in their opinion that new theoretical applications, whether borrowed from a different sub-discipline or newly established will strengthen the cooperation of cultural anthropologists and archaeologists in new research questions exploring the breadth of human cultural diversity.

## References

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