

In July 2007, [Donald L. Donham](#) became the ninth editor of AE. This month's column is devoted to an interview I had with Don about his editorial role to date and his plans for the next few years at the helm of the American Ethnological Society's journal.

**JD:** Why were you interested in becoming editor of AE?

**DD:** I had multiple motives. First there is the pleasure of seeing others' work develop. Also, I like working as part of a team. Virginia Dominguez developed a great staff for the journal, and I was lucky to keep them. We're situated across the country, but given the internet we work together productively. In the early stages of my career, I was most concerned with the development of anthropological theory. Now, my tastes have changed somewhat. Increasingly, I get bored with abstract discussions. But I find dense and convincing ethnographic descriptions intrinsically fascinating. I'm beginning to think that the key question for social and cultural anthropology in the present is not so much theory but methodology. But I don't yet know how to talk (abstractly) about "methodology." I thought that being editor of AE would help prepare me for that task. That's my selfish motivation.

**JD:** You have been editor for almost a year. What has surprised you most? What have you felt least prepared for?

**DD:** was totally unprepared to deal with recent changes in the economics of academic publishing. My respect for peer review, having seen how it works up close, has only increased, but orchestrating peer review is expensive, and it depends upon the relatively selfless gift of scholars being willing to provide close, critical readings. In the past, editors' universities, membership dues, and journal subscriptions (mostly from libraries) have paid for this function, but all these sources have come under increasing pressure. When these sources of revenue are flat or falling—and particularly when projected monies from the internet are not materializing as expected—we have to confront the fact that the old business model is not working. This was the situation the Executive Board of the AAA faced last summer when they decided to switch from a public institution, the University of California Press, to a for-profit company, Wiley-Blackwell. According to the external financial consultant

employed at the time, the bids from these two were comparable. The Board chose to go with Wiley-Blackwell because of its greater expertise in marketing and advertising. That may well be the case, but I remain concerned about how a partnership between an unwieldy, scholarly organization like the AAA and a for-profit company like Wiley-Blackwell will work out in practice. There will be occasions when academic values come into conflict with profit-making. How will these conflicts they be adjudicated? This is a question I think all of us are going to have to work on.

**JD:** What new initiatives do you have planned for the journal?

**DD:** The journal will stay the same, mostly. Virginia Dominguez did a great job, and she has been incredibly generous in the transition. AE remains committed to what I call the classic ethnographic essay—even as new strategies of writing, data collection, and types of site emerge. It's difficult to define exactly what "classic" means, but I believe it requires minimally a certain thickness or depth in which ironies of unexpected juxtaposition appear. Every successful ethnographic description is, then, a comment upon something more than itself, upon some wider, "theoretical" conversation. I have assembled a distinguished international board for the journal with members based in the UK, Holland, Spain, Senegal, and Brazil, as well as the U S

. Even though "American" is a part of the official title of AE, my goal is to rise above North American provincialism.

In the Forward to the February issue, I outline a call for proposals for a few types of new occasional pieces. The late Clifford Geertz was a master of a certain kind of review article, which he typically published in the *New York Review of Books*. Not only did he describe and evaluate a book, sometimes two or three, but such work(s) were put in the context of current scholarly debate and development. I think a limited number of these would be useful for the journal and the field.

I would also like to see interviews of scholars at work. Typically, these have been devoted to very senior scholars, but I see no reason why they could not be directed as well at younger scholars devoted to some breaking development. I invite proposals.

But most of all I invite the continued submission of the best work in social and cultural anthropology. Given the transition in editorial offices—and in the press that publishes AE—the turnaround time for review and decision has recently lengthened a bit. I am committed to reversing this. Recently, we have begun routing submissions to a new online system that will allow us to be more efficient in tracking articles. As ever, we remain dependent upon what Blanche Dubois called the kindness of strangers, unpaid reviewers who sandwich in critical work for the journal amidst all of the other demands on their time. But I think we can do better.

## **Interview with Donald L. Donham, May 2008**

Written by Joanna Davidson, Contributing Editor

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We will be announcing the new online system soon, after we are confident we have worked out all the kinks.