

## REFLECTIONS OF A GUEST EDITOR: WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO PUBLISH A SPECIAL ISSUE WITH JASO?

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Taking responsibility for the JASO special issue, *Survivance and Uncertainty: What Remains After the Crisis* (Volume XV, 2023), gave me hands-on and collaborative experience in editing a special issue of an academic journal. I envisioned the theme as a call for experimentation. I was inspired by the prospect of expanding theoretical boundaries and adopted the concept of 'survivance' from Critical Native American Studies to be applied in conversations with ethnographic research conducted in different parts of the world. I utilised this concept as a heuristic device that signified not only survival but also the proactive affirmation of life and agency in the face of adversity while acknowledging past struggles and life's calamities. The nuances of the term, along with the inquiry into 'what remains' post-crisis, appeared crucial in a world where crises, conflicts, systemic violence, pandemics, and economic turmoil are frequently the norm. I realised that the issue's theme could offer not only an academic contribution but also a framework for navigating periods of crisis and their aftermath. The issue theme could inspire researchers and their participants as they confront ongoing uncertainties with introspection, resilience, and a sense of historical and cultural continuity, while showcasing ethnographic work from diverse contexts that illustrate the adaptability of anthropologists and their participants.

### **The inspiration behind the theme**

At the time of the global COVID-19 pandemic, I recalled Virginia Woolf's words, 'I meant to write about death, only life came breaking in as usual' (Woolf 1978: 167). Woolf explains in her diaries that she continued to capture the immediacy of life amid her personal crisis and struggles. Her words inspired me to see how life insistently disrupts despair, revealing the resilience that animates the mode of survival and opens the door to survivance. The pandemic

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impacted many lives in ways that were never anticipated. Life was on hold yet care, family obligations, and research demands were simultaneously pressing. I was struggling between continuing my fieldwork, writing, and sustaining a sense of 'the normal' while trying to carve out moments of fun and vitality within the cracks of the pandemic's restrictions.

Another inspiration came from Albert Camus's absurdist novel *The Plague*, which I read while confined by the COVID-19 lockdown in my home. It had uncanny parallels with the present at that time. Camus's portrayal of the fictional epidemic in Oran, Algeria, conjured a sense of alienation and trials of survival that resonated with the isolation, anxiety, and fragmented digital connections with family members overseas that I was experiencing during the pandemic. It reads almost like the work of an anthropologist, who narrates how the epidemic and colonialism reshaped lives and relationships at that time. However, Camus's portrayal of the epidemic and the experience of the colonised in Oran was also in tune with my readings of Native American scholars, particularly Gerald Vizenor, who brought the notion of survivance into a sharper focus (2008). Vizenor explained that survivance is not only about endurance but also about acknowledging adversity, reclaiming agency, and embracing life's fullness. In *The Plague*, Camus offered one model; in Vizenor's work I found another: an approach that resists subjugation and asserts presence through agency, memory, creativity, and resilience.

The notion of survivance, thought of as the living that goes beyond mere survival, felt enticing as an essential framework for grasping the resilience and adaptability of those living through 'vertiginous times' (Knight 2022). Thinking about my fellow anthropologists stitching together research plans, developing creative methods, and navigating the pandemic's new regulations, I realised that the pandemic sparked a process of acknowledging, adapting, repairing, and continuing forward in one way or another. Survivance became, for me, a way of understanding how we might acknowledge loss and grief without being overcome by them, a way of recognising the hardships in life and, at the same time, finding reasons to persist. It is not just survival, I realised, but a persistent insistence on noticing life breaking through.

## **Initial dialogue with JASO's editorial team and launching the call for papers**

By July 2022, the idea for this special issue had taken shape after pitching it along with the call for papers to the JASO editorial team. I hoped to have a collection of articles that would initiate academic discussions on the theme and present how people from different parts of the globe dealt with different uncertainties and moments of crisis while celebrating the tenacity of ethnographers working under extraordinary constraints of travel bans and experimenting with digital methods to conduct ethnographies. The call for papers marked the beginning of many rewarding conversations on the theme. It took over a year and a half to publish the issue from its inception in July 2022 until publication in December 2023. The issue contains thirteen articles in addition to the introduction. Receiving the responses from the issue's contributors was intriguing and it quickly became apparent that the idea of 'survivance'

chimed with the contributors, in light of the ethnographic research that they had completed during COVID-19 travel bans and pandemic restrictions.

There was an underlying uncertainty that I felt when issuing the call for papers: Would it attract enough contributors? Would scholars feel compelled to engage with the theoretical experimentation it proposes? The call for papers was disseminated widely across various platforms, including the department's website and the JASO homepage. I posed a set of questions to act as prompts designed to inspire submissions that explored both the vulnerability and resilience involved in navigating crises and uncertainty. When expressions of interest began to arrive in my email box, with nearly 19 responses, it became clear that the theme resonated with anthropologists working across different contexts.

As the submissions began to arrive, I followed up with the potential contributors to make sure they submitted their final articles on time. I met with some of them online to discuss the theme. I also read early drafts of proposed articles. These conversations were immensely satisfying: shaping a thematic special issue that allowed for brainstorming and collaboration under a common theme while preserving the distinct perspectives of each article. The contributors were keen on academic discussion even if it was not certain that their articles would be published, as all the submissions had to go through a double-blind peer review process.

## **The peer review process**

After receiving the final articles in February 2023, I started sorting out the submissions, ensuring that they were anonymised, and inviting different academics to act as peer reviewers. Each article had two peer reviewers who provided detailed feedback and recommended the following steps: whether to review and resubmit or reject the article. It was quite a challenging experience to find peer reviewers, especially during term time and busy schedules of academic work. I followed up with each reviewer to ensure that the timeline of the publication was on track. As the guest editor, I acted also as a mediator between the feedback received from the peer review process and the contributor, making sure that the feedback was constructive and well received. In fact, the peer review process showed the strength of academic collaboration as the reviewers provided invaluable feedback that sharpened each article's arguments and discussion.

## **Editorial rounds and collaboration with the editorial team**

Perhaps one of the most exciting parts of the process was writing the introduction of the special issue, especially after finding the common threads that I traced through the diverse articles included in it. Some articles captured emergent forms of solidarity and resistance, while others traced the continuity of certain practices or carving new paths through environmental devastation or political displacement. Each article, in its own way, reinforced

the idea that ethnography remains a vital, flexible tool for documenting and interpreting human resilience in diverse contexts.

The close collaboration and communication with JASO's editorial team: David Zeitlyn, Morgan Clarke, and Chihab El Khachab, brought clarity and structure to the editorial process from the start until the final editorial rounds. We worked to establish a foundation for clear communication, realistic planning, and a timeline. After finalising the peer review process and receiving the revised submissions, they reviewed and proofread all the submissions and made sure they were edited properly and according to JASO style. Their thoughtful and constructive feedback not only strengthened individual articles but also ensured the special issue was published on time. We celebrated its publication with a public event at the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography.

## Finally...

Balancing my doctoral research and writing the thesis with the demands of curating this special issue required delicate sensitivity to both my time and a motivated passion to complete my writing projects and publish on time. For me, this experience highlighted how academic work itself acts itself as a form of survivance: a way to make sense of the world, forge connections, and push disciplinary boundaries. Each step, from conceptualising the theme to refining the language and final editing phase, reflected the passion and academic rigour of the editorial team, the authors, and the peer reviewers. This publication represents, for me, more than the sum of its articles, which present various ethnographies. It also represents a testament to the adaptability of ethnographers and ethnography, even in precarious times.

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