

- Damien: [00:00](#) For some reason, it is almost impossible to make anthropology funny. I don't know why it is. I don't know why it is. I don't think it's intrinsic, but it's like, for some reason there's very little humor and anthropology and I think that there are ways, ways of making it funnier.
- Diego: [00:17](#) Challenge accepted.
- Arjun: [00:29](#) Welcome to the third episode of Anthropological Airwaves. My name is Arjun Shankar, postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania. Now, thus far, we have been attempting to critically engage with anthropological work, which might both shift the way we think about our own research, but also might open up new avenues for public engagement. And this episode is no different. You're going to hear from Damien Stankiewicz of Temple University in conversation with Diego Arispe-Bazan of the University of Pennsylvania. And they're really asking us in this episode to interrogate the way we think about media ethnography. If in the past, we may have imagined an anthropological project dedicated to media which focused on the national imagination and the construction of the national imagination, Damien and Diego are really telling us that in the 21st century, digital fragmentation has forced us to both think about the imagination itself differently, but also to think differently about how we might study media consumption and production. And with that, I'll leave it to Diego and Damien to take us forward. Enjoy.
- Diego: [01:40](#) My name is Diego Arispe-Bazan, I am a fifth year in the PhD program in Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania and I am here speaking with Damien Stankiewicz, Professor at Temple University. One of the things that was of interest to the podcast producers, and of interest to me also, was an article that recently came out that you wrote about the notion of social imaginaries. And in your article, and I and I fully agree with the argument that you put forth in the article that this concept of the imaginary or the imagination has reached a tipping point of overused, but it seemed like it was something sort of stuck in your craw about it. You know what, why did you pick this topic to write an article about?
- Damien: [02:22](#) Well, first of all, thank you so much for inviting me to talk with you guys today. When people have, as you say, a kind of bone to pick, I think very often it comes from you know, your own personal experiences, engagements and experiences in the field. And this is where this article grew out of. I mean when I was trained in anthropology, it was a very Andersonian moment and it was sort of the launch of and of catching on media

anthropology. And in some ways and at that moment it was very kind of liberatory and it was this moment of feeling like, wow, we can go out and we can study pamphlets in Papa New Guinea and we can study television in and radio in Peru, and all of these things will help us to get at something very fundamental about either a national consciousness or some sort of coherent consciousness. And so my research in Europe was about sort of taking this and applying this tool, as it were, to understanding this television channel that had been launched by France and Germany and the kind of interests of a broader European collectivity.

Damien: [03:20](#) And you know, in a certain way, which I think is very compelling and which I discussed more in my book. It sort of aligned exactly with this kind of Appadurain-Andersonian moment of saying, oh well media are the kind of motors for social collectivities. And they literally kind of took a leaf out of that book and said let's do this, let's launch this television channel. So this was really compelling example of that for me, of this idea of imagination, which is literally the language that they use, that they wanted a common imagination. And finding that just an all kinds of ways, big and small, it just didn't sort of cohere, with the squeezing of audiences and the fragmentation of audiences and the digitization of media and the ways in which people are moving across and don't attach themselves to any kind of media platform in any kind of consistent way.

Damien: [04:08](#) It's all the more reason why I think this kind of paradigm is just too broad, and lends itself to these kinds of overstatements or overgeneralizations about how people think things together. And you see, I mean you can always generate an argument, right? It's not that hard to say, oh well European identity is this or that, because some, you know, ten people told me this thing. But I think that's actually is an over simplification and I also think that it actually is politically problematic, because I think what you're doing is reifying and kind of re-inscribing these big holistic, congruent, cultural wholes that are I think mostly fictitious.

Diego: [04:50](#) There's a deep anxiety nowadays, especially with the current moment and what happened with the election. People are interested in two thing, I find a lot. First of all, this idea of the fake news, we were describing with the squeezed audiences and the directed targeted news, fake or otherwise... But then also people are really concerned with research and how academics have a certain sort put forth this narrative that, for example, one of the candidates was definitely gonna win. And so people have equated the loss of trust in these forms of

analysis and knowledge production with a post-truth moment, which I find profoundly problematic. I think also because your research, broadly speaking, is also about the formation of political publics through media is relevant today, obviously not just in the US but in your own context, right in Germany and France where elections are looming. One of the things that I wanted to ask you about is about these two anxieties, right? The anxiety about fake news and the anxiety about these forms of knowledge that have failed on a few different accounts for people.

- Damien: [05:49](#) Big questions, which I wish I had some sort of silver bullet for thinking about fake news and what the problem is there and it, you know, I think Diego, one thing that you pointed out just in talking just now is that there is so much, you know, for lack of a better word, discourse being generated about these things and it's very difficult in a way to think critically about, "where is the truth," "what is being produced" and "by whom." Because as you're pointing out, I mean these numbers and the election polling and all of the kind of quote unquote collective knowledge and understanding about what the election was and where it was going, sort of fell flat on its face, right?
- Damien: [06:33](#) And people are still sort of debating why that is and how that happened. But then on the other side, now you have all of these accusations about fake news, and who's generating it? And it's happening on both sides, right? It's the liberals and the conservatives, both sort of throwing this back at each other.
- Gene Wilder: [06:49](#) [Musical Interlude] Make a wish. Count to three. Come with me and you'll be in a world of pure imagination.
- News Clip 1: [07:00](#) No, I don't think CNN is fake news.
- News Clip 2: [07:09](#) Because the underlying assumption is-- OK. Thanks everyone. Thanks everyone.
- Damien: [07:12](#) If I had anything to offer to this whole sort of mess of things, which I think we're so inside it right now and so it's very difficult to gain distance. But I would say that it connects in a way back to the article and to the kind of notion of imagination because I think ultimately we are prone to thinking and it is sort of easier both to talk about and to explain politics in terms of whole publics, right? Or whole, coherent groups of people that somehow all have similar reasons for doing things or saying things and get their news the same way. I mean in a certain way, we are still all operating within an Andersonian Paradigm. News agencies, analysts, pundits, academics themselves --

we're all still sort of thinking about, well, how do we explain in a kind of, you know, maybe two page article, what is going on with conservatives in the middle of the country and their news consumption.

Damien: [08:10](#) I think that anthropologists, sociologists, journalists, all of us together, have to really start to rethink the complexities of where people are getting their news, how they're interpreting their news, whether or not it's even news where they're getting these ideas and information. And I think that this is another problem that I try to point out in the article, which is that we are kind of media-centric in a way that I think doesn't always help us. In the sense that yes, you can go to the middle of Arkansas, and you can go to a small town that's very, very red and say, how do you know? What kinds of news do you read? What kinds of news do you watch? Where do you get your news? And you may actually be really far a-field from understanding how people are actually processing political information, which may come mostly from their family or word of mouth or who knows, you know, there's a whole social context there that actually anthropologists are really well equipped to think about.

Damien: [09:06](#) And so small wisdom, if I have anything to offer to this whole moment is that there is, I think, a mis-emphasis on both the kind of coherences or the or the consistencies in which people find news, consume news, and also, the over-attention in some ways to the texts themselves or to the messages or narratives themselves that we presume somehow extend from Washington to the middle of the country somewhere. I think the answer is really twofold: I think one, we haven't done very much ethnography in these places, period. I mean one thing that the anthropology meetings this year, there was a kind of emergency session about post-election anthropology and one thing that a few of us who study media we're talking about is that we really don't have anyone who's been studying this stuff.

Damien: [09:59](#) We don't have much ethnography of the far-right or the right in this country, period. Much less the ways that they're using media or not. Right? And I would say that the second part of that is that we do need to do the ethnography, spend the time there, and then see how or why media matters.

Diego: [10:19](#) I feel maybe I'm wrong, but I feel that anthropologist, because they're so embedded in the fine-grained analysis and the moments sharing space with people individually and collectively, but not, you know, you can't do an ethnography of 100 million people. Right?

- Diego: [10:34](#) So there's that issue to anthropology, but also the fact that, you know, we weave a tangled web, right? And so it's very hard to produce policy from anthropology for people to follow. And even in media, you know, we want to say, well this is how we can approach our media reception or how to conduct a reception study, for example, people want to hear, I want this solved next month or in six months or a year. And it's very difficult I think for anthropologists to do.
- Damien: [10:59](#) But actually I think anthropologists -- and it's not that what we do is less valuable. In fact, I think it's as valid, if not more valuable to say: "okay, we have these very kind of neatly packaged hypotheses or statements about why people do or think the things they do," maybe in relationship to media for example. And so let's see. Let's see how that works. When we look at the micro-scale, when we look at a community, or we look at people's everyday lives, and what they're doing in their living rooms and in their workplaces, and if we, if we are able to, as I think we are, to say: "well actually yes, it gets it right in these ways, but actually these other ways this gets quite wrong."
- Damien: [11:42](#) That's incredibly useful, and I really think that we as a discipline are some of the only people out there who are equipped or at least committed to doing that.
- Diego: [11:51](#) I think especially now because as we were saying earlier, there is an opening now for the kinds of research and knowledge production that anthropologists can put out, because you know, there is a now a deeper distrust in, to put a coarsely, quantified forms of data that have been processed through any number of statistical procedures, etc. etc. You know, having a solid contribution is significant. So one of the last things I wanted to talk about was a little bit that how do we this? You know, this is sort of out of the scope of particularly their research, but, but also not entirely, because you do write about media engagement. Actually one of your articles is about imagined audiences, right? But if we were to imagine an audience -- putting you on the spot -- for anthropological research, what would you imagine it being?
- Damien: [12:41](#) I think that we have to first make clear what anthropology is and what it does, and then fill in what comes after that. Because I think my sense of a lot of anthropological media outreach, the kind of remaking of anthropology as relevant to a broader public, doesn't always make clear to people that anthropologists are in the field of, or in the business of shall we say, studying kind of human similarity and difference. And these

kinds of fundamental "Anthro 101" concepts and premises that if you don't have them, and if they're not readily accessible or made clear before you're encountering some particular ethnographic project or argument, a theoretical argument, I think people can tune out fairly quickly.

Damien: [13:38](#) It's not because they're not interested. It's that they don't have the kind of framework for processing or interpreting what anthropologists are supposed to be doing or why we do what we do. And our methodology for example, is fundamental to that. So that's why I, for example, at Temple now in collaboration with Philly Cam we have this television series that, well it's only every few months, every three to six months that we're able to produce an episode... But it's called humaniTV and the reason why we call it humaniTV is, because I personally think that it's very important that we emphasize that anthropology is humanology, right? It's the study of humans and it kind of broad way and empathetic way, in a deeply finely-grained way that pays attention to people's everyday lives.

Damien: [14:22](#) And I think if we can find a way to just first or at least regularly or somehow kind of consistently make that clear, alongside all of the stuff that then we are able to offer, I think that we'd be much better off.

Diego: [14:39](#) If somebody gave you a huge grant to produce some kind of media object about anthropology to transmit maybe even your own research, what would you envision? What would you dream up?

Damien: [14:53](#) Well, I can tell you that, although it's been on a much more limited budget, part of my conceptualization of this Philly CAM TV which is on a smaller scale and on a much tinier budget, what I would want to see done is [the same] on a much broader scale in a much bigger budget. Which is to say, I mean each episode has a theme, and each segment that people are developing for this semester is a way of investigating that.

Damien: [15:20](#) So they're short. Some of them are short, some of them are long, some are ethnographic, vaguely. Some are interviews, some are experimental, completely animated, or using other kinds of found footage, etc. During last semester we had this gift, episode gifts and gift-giving. This one crew, these three students did a piece on gifted students. What [gifted] means in terms of why is that the language that we use, and what kinds of burdens does that have? And the kind of double-edged sword of this label of "being gifted". And I thought it was incredibly interesting way of thinking about this thing that I had never

really thought seriously about. And I think that that's the kind of thing, that if you blew it up to a broader scale and you and you had the platform and the money, I think that you could do this in a way that was incredibly slick and fun and just mind-bending.

Diego: [16:16](#) And so I guess, one last thing I wanted to ask you: you've been talking about it all throughout, right, the political moment that we're in right now in the United States, which is where we live, where our institutions are based, what do you think anthropology has to now, more concretely, bring to that conversation?

Damien: [16:32](#) I think that we're in a moment where we really do need to -- and we've been doing this in various ways for a long time, so I don't want to suggest that it hasn't been part of the story the anthropology has been telling for a long time -- but I think we really do need to direct our energies in some ways to challenging the kind of cultural whole-isms that are so, in a way, banal and constitute so much of what people imagined to be like the social contours of the world... in terms of, not only national configurations of culture, but religious configurations of culture, the kinds of bounded, homogenized conceptions of culture which we have for a very long time been taking aim at.

Damien: [17:13](#) But which on the one hand, um, have been in some ways recuperated and redeployed years after the fact by people who, you know, culture is no longer our concept. It hasn't been for a long time. And I think that we are seeing, especially in the last 10 and 20 years, this kind of kind of objectification of culture that has been very, very troubling. And I think has accelerated in a way that has made it commonsensical, which I think we as anthropologists now need to pay a lot of attention to and in both engaging with these popular or vernacular forms of cultural objectification that we are seeing all around us... and on the theoretical front, trying to find alternative ways of talking about sameness and difference that do not sort of feed into or map onto these kinds of overly politicized and I think highly reductivist swarms of talking about human collectivity. I think we're thinking about how to do that, but I do think we're still not completely free of culture and all the implications of collectivities that we spin and which then have their own lives in the world. Right? That, I think we all would prefer to not see mobilized in the ways that they are. Obviously we have some of these words, pluralism, fluidity, hybridity, but they haven't quite, I think, done the job of nailing the coffin shut. as I was saying earlier. There's so much we don't know.

- Damien: [18:40](#) I think that one thing that this political moment has revealed is that our models and our ways of explaining things, our way of predicting things have kind of broken down our -- when I say our, I'm just speaking very, very broadly because I don't think it's anthropologists necessarily, but our kind of common political language and models, right? Yeah. Yeah. we're. We're doing perfectly fine, but no, but I do think that it is time for anthropologists and other social scientists and researchers and people everywhere to think about why, what has happened, right?
- Damien: [19:18](#) Why have, why have we failed to understand one another in a real way? And I think that that's an important way of framing it. Not, oh, well there's this group that voted for Trump, or that there people who are xenophobic, and who knows what they're thinking. We have to go find out because I think that there's a kind of, as you say, an imagining of these people are a projection about what these people quote unquote, are like. And to break down some of the misunderstanding and lack of information -- it's going to take partnerships, collaborations with groups of people who with whom we don't normally partner or collaborate with, to understand so that they can understand what we're thinking. Then we can understand what they're thinking. And, and as I was saying earlier, I think that that, really probably requires that we start to shift our focus to places where those kinds of discrepancies and belief and ideology and what we consider to be moral life are most pronounced.
- Diego: [20:15](#) And I think it comes back again to this poorly formulated imagination as collectivity, as collective feeling as collective thought, not just in the anthropological world, but also for people writ-large. People imagining what others imagine, and how you pointed out, I mean we joked about it, but as anthropologists, were not fine, right, because we have to engage with any number of people through any number of means. So we're actually not fine, even though we are not one of the disciplines that people have lost faith in, post-election and etc.
- Damien: [20:44](#) I think that's because people never had faith in us anyway.
- Diego: [20:47](#) Let's end with that!
- Damien: [20:51](#) Who said anthropology couldn't be funny??
- Diego: [20:54](#) Again, challenge accepted... my new podcast idea. I'm going to take over.

Damien: [20:59](#) This one just turned into a comedy hour.

Diego: [21:02](#) Well thank you so much. Thank you Damien for agreeing to chat with us and talk to us about your research, this article and laugh a little bit.

Damien: [21:10](#) Thank you so much.

News Clip 3: [21:11](#) Big day for president trump has just arrived in Israel. As you can imagine, there is a massive security. Can you imagine Donald Trump standing up one day and delivering state of the union address.

Arjun: [21:21](#) Thank you all so much for listening, and I hope you will tune in next episode, which is on the subject of museum studies. The episode is produced by Nooshin Samimi, and the host of the episode is Stephanie Mach, graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania who will be in conversation with Monique Scott of Bryn Mawr College and Salam Al Kuntar, of the Penn Museum, thinking together about the ways that museums are both active sites for anthropological knowledge production, as well as the many ways that museums engage a diverse array of publics. It should be a fantastic conversation and I hope you all tune in.