The Jobs We've Had: An Introduction

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Over coffee at the 2022 AAA Meeting in Seattle, fellow anthropologists Tarini Bedi, Mythri Jegathesan, and I started talking about the jobs we’d had when we were in college and grad school. The topic came up because I’m writing a book on professional organizers (the kind who organize your closet, not your labor movement) and Mythri told us she’d once done some organizing and house cleaning jobs during grad school. She’d needed the money to supplement her TA income while writing her dissertation and hadn’t told her parents for fear they would disapprove of her need to take a second, lower-paying job and be even more critical of her choice to pursue a PhD. Tarini mentioned that she, too, had worked a side gig in grad school. Hers was in market research, the field she’d worked in prior to entering grad school. In addition to providing supplemental income, the job was a welcome reminder not to take grad school too seriously; there was a whole world of professional options out there. Tarini’s comments reminded me of my own undergrad stint as a Starbucks barista, which had offered me a much-needed escape from a sometimes-stifling campus culture.

As we spoke, I started thinking about how the jobs we’d had as students related to the jobs we had now, all three of us anthropologists who specialize in the study of work. Because when we talk about the work we did to become anthropologists, we’re usually referring to coursework or fieldwork, the processes of learning how to research, write, and teach. Yet many of us also did very different kinds of work to support ourselves as students. We waited tables, worked retail, babysat, drove taxis and Ubers, wrote ad copy—you name it, one of us probably did it, to earn money and sometimes for other, more complicated reasons.

As someone who studies work and unemployment, I know how crucial work experiences can be to shaping one’s sense of oneself and the world around us. For me, paid work has always been a source of pride and independence. I got my first job at 15 as a receptionist at a hair salon. I loved how grown up it felt to answer the phone in that silky, professional tone. “Rage Salon, can I help you?” I liked being taken seriously by the adults working around me. I liked the reassurance that there was life beyond high school. And I loved the paychecks, which eventually bought my first (used) car. For me, it was natural to continue working when I went to college. But at the Ivy League university I attended, most students didn’t work; when they did, it was usually on campus, in the library or cafeteria. Most of my classmates didn’t seem to share my desire to get away from campus, to interact with people who weren’t college students. I think about this occasionally now that I teach at a university where being a student who doesn’t have a job is a rarity.

With over 40,000 students, California State University, Fullerton, is the largest undergraduate university in California. A third of our students are first-generation college students; two-thirds receive financial aid; over three-quarters are students of color. Most of our students work—full-time, part-time, you name it. They’re servers and administrative assistants, nannies and contractors, tutors and retail clerks, even Disney princesses and Jungle Cruise Skippers (our campus is near Disneyland). One of my undergraduates, now a community college professor, worked nights as a janitor and attended school during the day. Another had to drop my class because the ambulance company he drove for kept scheduling him for shifts during school hours. When
another of my advisees was accepted into a competitive program for underrepresented students hoping to
attend PhD programs, the program’s administrator told her she’d have to quit her full-time job at a grocery
store in order to focus on her schoolwork. “If I do that,” the student asked, “who’s going to pay my rent?” I
admire my students for all they do, and I’m grateful for the opportunity to teach and learn from them. But I
sometimes wish they had a chance to know what it’s like to attend college without so many other competing
responsibilities layered on top. And then I remember that when I was an undergrad who had the privilege of
doing exactly that, I chose to work anyway.

Work is complicated, as are our feelings toward it. Yet I can’t recall hearing much about the jobs my academic
friends had before they were academics. I was emailing about this column with anthropologist Kathryn Dudley
and she described these early jobs as “the formative experiences that get overlooked in our haste to pursue a
life led otherwise.” When they do come up in our conversations, it’s usually as anecdotes mentioned in passing,
like those my friends and I shared over coffee in Seattle. But these jobs, and the role they played in our lives,
deserve closer attention. Talking about them publicly can also help demystify the college and graduate school
experience, where the mundane work of earning money is often obscured by the ostensibly more important
intellectual work we’re undertaking at the same time.

I proposed to my colleagues that morning in Seattle that we write about these work experiences and see if we
could find others who might want to, too. They were game (you’ll read Tarini and Mythri’s essays in future
columns), and I reached out to Josh Fisher, the editor of Exertions, because it seemed like the perfect venue for
these short-form pieces. He had the idea to shape these recollections into a special issue that would help launch
a new series he’d been planning on “The Work of Anthropology.”

We circulated a call for anthropologists’ stories about the jobs they did to get by in school—what they did, why
they did it, how they felt about it, and how it shaped them, personally and professionally. We asked
contributors to consider how their paid work related to their lives as students and scholars and what their
advisors, peers, or family thought about those jobs. We weren’t looking for research articles, but we hoped
contributors would use their work experiences as an entry for critical reflection on conversations around work
and anthropology. Their contributions might connect to discussions around value, productivity, virtue, and
shame as they relate to different types of labor. Or they could consider their work in relation to student loans,
the funding landscape, and inequities between students and across programs and universities. However they
wanted to approach it, we were excited to hear what folks might want to say about the jobs they’d had in
school.

The response was phenomenal. We received nearly 30 proposals, each as original and fascinating as the next.
We heard from junior faculty, tenured professors, graduate students, adjunct instructors, and folks who’d left
academia for other industries. Each had a story to tell, one that connected jobs they’d held to larger
conversations around work and anthropology. They wrote about supporting themselves through school as a
low-income single parent; about finding integrity in “demeaning” jobs; about how a bevy of “side jobs”
prepared them for the precarity of adjunct work; about the sexual harassment they have encountered at every single job they’ve had; about work as a rite of passage for blue-collar students. And on and on and on. Rather than turn away contributions with such great potential, we decided to expand the special issue into an ongoing series that would allow us to feature more of these wonderful pieces.

And that brings us to this first issue, which will simultaneously launch *Exertions*’ new series on “The Work of Anthropology” and our new monthly column, “The Jobs We Had.” The essays we’ve selected to kick off the series come to us from scholars at every stage of their career, from graduate student to emeritus professor. Our contributors work in academia and in industry across a range of fields and subfields. The jobs they describe include caregiving, gardening, waiting tables, pumping gas, working in a wig store, clerical temp work, adjunct teaching, picking up poop in public parks, and canvassing door-to-door to help delay evictions during the Covid pandemic. Their experiences touch on some of work’s best and worst aspects: the camaraderie of laboring alongside others; the frustrations of working within self-serving bureaucracies; the ubiquity of sexual harassment; and the value of hard labor in service to community. They reveal the inadequacies and exigencies of the system of grants, stipends, and (often elusive) salaries on which many of us have depended, both as students and beyond. They also point to the tangled ways in which the jobs we’ve held have shaped the academic work we’ve gone on to do in profound and unexpected ways, making us more compassionate teachers, more informed colleagues and community members, more rigorous researchers, more committed activists. I hope that these reflections, and the many that will follow in future columns, inspire us all to think more deeply and more often about our own work and its place in broader conversations around the work we do as anthropologists and the work anthropology does in the world.

**Call for Submissions**

*If you’re interested in contributing an article of 1500-2000 words for a future “The Jobs We Had” column, email a short pitch describing what you’d like to write about to Carrie Lane at clane@fullerton.edu.*

**Preview Image**

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